OCTOBER, 1934

Weird Tales

OCT.
25c

THE BLACK GOD'S KISS

the weirdest story ever told

By C. L. MOORE

also

H. BEDFORD-JONES

and others

WEIRD TALES

Printed in U. S. A.

Vol. 24, No. 4—25c

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Very dangerous he looked, leaning on his great sword and smiling down upon fallen Joiry's lord."

The Black God's Kiss

By C. L. MOORE

A gripping story of a warrior maid who went down into a land of unthinkable evil in search of a strange weapon

THEY brought in Joiry's tall commander, struggling between two men-at-arms who tightly gripped the ropes which bound their captive's mailed arms. They picked their way between mounds of dead as they crossed the great hall toward the dais where the conqueror sat, and twice they slipped a little in the blood that spattered the flags. When they came to a halt before the mailed figure on the dais, Joiry's commander was breathing hard, and the voice that echoed hollowly under the helmet's confines was hoarse with fury and despair.

Guillaume the conqueror leaned on his mighty sword, hands crossed on its hilt, grinning down from his height upon the furious captive before him. He was a big man, Guillaume, and he looked bigger

still in his spattered armor. There was blood on his hard, scarred face, and he was grinning a white grin that split his short, curly beard glitteringly. Very splendid and very dangerous he looked, leaning on his great sword and smiling down upon fallen Joiry's lord, struggling between the stolid men-at-arms.

"Unshell me this lobster," said Guillaume in his deep, lazy voice. "We'll see what sort of face the fellow has who gave us such a battle. Off with his helmet, you."

But a third man had to come up and slash the straps which held the iron helmet on, for the struggles of Joiry's commander were too fierce, even with bound arms, for either of the guards to release their hold. There was a moment of sharp struggle; then the straps parted and the helmet rolled loudly across the flagstones.

Guillaume's white teeth clicked on a startled oath. He stared. Joiry's lady glared back at him from between her captors, wild red hair tousled, wild lion-yellow eyes ablaze.

"God curse you!" snarled the lady of Joiry between clenched teeth. "God blast your black heart!"

Guillaume scarcely heard her. He was still staring, as most men stared when they first set eyes upon Jirel of Joiry. She was tall as most men, and as savage as the wildest of them, and the fall of Joiry was bitter enough to break her heart as she stood snarling curses up at her tall conqueror. The face above her mail might not have been fair in a woman's head-dress, but in the steel setting of her armor it had a biting, sword-edge beauty as keen as the flash of blades. The red hair was short upon her high, defiant head, and the yellow blaze of her eyes held fury as a crucible holds fire.

Guillaume's stare melted into a slow smile. A little light kindled behind his eyes as he swept the long, strong lines of her with a practised gaze. The smile broadened, and suddenly he burst into full-throated laughter, a deep bull bellow of amusement and delight.

"By the Nails!" he roared. "Here's welcome for the warrior! And what forfeit d'ye offer, pretty one, for your life?"

She blazed a curse at him.

"So? Naughty words for a mouth so fair, my lady. Well, we'll not deny you put up a gallant battle. No man could have done better, and many have done worse. But against Guillaume——" He inflated his splendid chest and grinned down at her from the depths of his jutting beard. "Come to me, pretty one," he commanded. "I'll wager your mouth is sweeter than your words."

Jirel drove a spurred heel into the shin

● Within one short year, C. L. Moore has become established as a giant among writers of weird fiction, taking rank with those who have heretofore been regarded as supreme: Algernon Blackwood, Arthur Machen, and H. P. Lovecraft. It was only last November that this writer's first story, "Shambleau," appeared in WEIRD TALES. It disclosed such finished craftsmanship, such imagination and such utter originality that it was hailed at once as a veritable tour de force of literature; and today C. L. Moore is the favorite author of thousands of readers throughout the English-speaking world. The author is an American. With this story, "The Black God's Kiss," perhaps the weirdest story ever penned, C. L. Moore presents a new character, Jirel of Joiry, whose fascinating adventures will hold you spellbound.

of one guard and twisted from his grip as he howled, bringing up an iron knee into the abdomen of the other. She had writhed from their grip and made three long strides toward the door before Guillaume caught her. She felt his arms closing about her from behind, and lashed out with both spiked heels in a futile assault upon his leg armor, twisting like a maniac, fighting with her knees and spurs, straining hopelessly at the ropes which bound her arms. Guillaume laughed and whirled her round, grinning down into the blaze of her yellow eyes. Then deliberately he set a fist under her chin and tilted her mouth up to his. There was a cessation of her hoarse curses.

"By Heaven, that's like kissing a sword-blade," said Guillaume, lifting his lips at last.

Jirel choked something that was mercifully muffled as she darted her head sidewise, like a serpent striking, and sank her teeth into his neck. She missed the jugular by a fraction of an inch.

Guillaume said nothing, then. He sought her head with a steady hand, found it despite her wild writhing, sank iron fingers deep into the hinges of her jaw, forcing her teeth relentlessly apart. When he had her free he glared down into the yellow hell of her eyes for an instant. The blaze of them was hot enough to scorch his scarred face. He grinned and lifted his ungauntleted hand, and with one heavy blow in the face he knocked her half-way across the room. She lay still upon the flags.

2

JIREL opened her yellow eyes upon darkness. She lay quiet for a while, collecting her scattered thoughts. By degrees it came back to her, and she muffled upon her arm a sound that was half curse and half sob. Joiry had fallen. For a time she lay rigid in the dark, forcing herself to the realization.

The sound of feet shifting on stone near by brought her out of that particular misery. She sat up cautiously, feeling about her to determine in what part of Joiry its liege lady was imprisoned. She knew that the sound she had heard must be a sentry, and by the dank smell of the darkness that she was underground. In one of the little dungeon cells, of course. With careful quietness she got to her feet, muttering a curse as her head reeled for an instant and then began to throb. In the utter dark she felt around the cell. Presently she came to a little wooden stool in a corner, and was satisfied. She gripped one leg of it with firm fingers and made her soundless way around the wall until she had located the door.

The sentry remembered, afterward, that he had heard the wildest shriek for help which had ever rung in his ears, and he remembered unbolting the door. Afterward, until they found him lying inside the locked cell with a cracked skull, he remembered nothing.

Jirel crept up the dark stairs of the north turret, murder in her heart. Many little hatreds she had known in her life, but no such blaze as this. Before her eyes in the night she could see Guillaume's scornful, scarred face laughing, the little jutting beard split with the whiteness of his mirth. Upon her mouth she felt the remembered weight of his, about her the strength of his arms. And such a blast of hot fury came over her that she reeled a little and clutched at the wall for support. She went on in a haze of red anger, and something like madness burning in her brain as a resolve slowly took shape out of the chaos of her hate. When that thought came to her she paused again, mid-step upon the stairs, and was conscious of a little coldness blowing over

her. Then it was gone, and she shivered a little, shook her shoulders and grinned wolfishly, and went on.

By the stars she could see through the arrow-slits in the wall it must be near to midnight. She went softly on the stairs, and she encountered no one. Her little tower room at the top was empty. Even the straw pallet where the serving-wench slept had not been used that night. Jirel got herself out of her armor alone, somehow, after much striving and twisting. Her doeskin shirt was stiff with sweat and stained with blood. She tossed it disdainfully into a corner. The fury in her eyes had cooled now to a contained and secret flame. She smiled to herself as she slipped a fresh shirt of doeskin over her tousled red head and donned a brief tunic of link-mail. On her legs she buckled the greaves of some forgotten legionary, relic of the not long past days when Rome still ruled the world. She thrust a dagger through her belt and took her own long two-handed sword bare-bladed in her grip. Then she went down the stairs again.

She knew there must have been revelry and feasting in the great hall that night, and by the silence hanging so heavily now she was sure that most of her enemies lay still in drunken slumber, and she experienced a swift regret for the gallons of her good French wine so wasted. And the thought flashed through her head that a determined woman with a sharp sword might work some little damage among the drunken sleepers before she was overpowered. But she put that idea by, for Guillaume would have posted sentries to spare, and she must not give up her secret freedom so fruitlessly.

DOWN the dark stairs she went, and crossed one corner of the vast central hall whose darkness she was sure hid wine-deadened sleepers, and so into the lesser dimness of the rough little chapel that Joiry boasted. She had been sure she would find Father Gervase there, and she was not mistaken. He rose from his knees before the altar, dark in his robe, the starlight through the narrow window shining upon his tonsure.

"My daughter!" he whispered. "My daughter! How have you escaped? Shall I find you a mount? If you can pass the sentries you should be in your cousin's castle by daybreak."

She hushed him with a lifted hand.

"No," she said. "It is not outside I go this night. I have a more perilous journey even than that to make. Shrive me, father."

He stared at her.

"What is it?"

She dropped to her knees before him and gripped the rough cloth of his habit with urgent fingers.

"Shrive me, I say! I go down into hell tonight to pray the devil for a weapon, and it may be I shall not return."

Gervase bent and gripped her shoulders with hands that shook.

"Look at me!" he demanded. "Do you know what you're saying? You go——"

"Down!" She said it firmly. "Only you and I know that passage, father—and not even we can be sure of what lies beyond. But to gain a weapon against that man I would venture into perils even worse than that."

"If I thought you meant it," he whispered, "I would waken Guillaume now and give you into his arms. It would be a kinder fate, my daughter."

"It's that I would walk through hell to escape," she whispered back fiercely. "Can't you see? Oh, God knows I'm not innocent of the ways of light loving—but to be any man's fancy, for a night or two, before he snaps my neck or sells me into

slavery—and above all, if that man were Guillaume! Can't you understand?"

"That would be shame enough," nodded Gervase. "But think, Jirel! For that shame there is atonement and absolution, and for that death the gates of heaven open wide. But this other—Jirel, Jirel, never through all eternity may you come out, body or soul, if you venture—down!"

She shrugged.

"To wreak my vengeance upon Guillaume I would go if I knew I should burn in hell for ever."

"But Jirel, I do not think you understand. This is a worse fate than the deepest depths of hell-fire. This is—this is beyond all the bounds of the hells we know. And I think Satan's hottest flames were the breath of paradise, compared to what may befall there."

"I know. Do you think I'd venture down if I could not be sure? Where else would I find such a weapon as I need, save outside God's dominion?"

"Jirel, you shall not!"

"Gervase, I go! Will you shrive me?" The hot yellow eyes blazed into his, lambent in the starlight.

After a moment he dropped his head. "You are my lady. I will give you God's blessing, but it will not avail you—there."

3

SHE went down into the dungeons again. She went down a long way through utter dark, over stones that were oozy and odorous with moisture, through blackness that had never known the light of day. She might have been a little afraid at other times, but that steady flame of hatred burning behind her eyes was a torch to light the way, and she could not wipe from her memory the feel of Guillaume's arms about her, the scornful press of his lips on her mouth. She whimpered a little, low in her throat, and a hot gust of hate went over her.

In the solid blackness she came at length to a wall, and she set herself to pulling the loose stones from this with her free hand, for she would not lay down the sword. They had never been laid in mortar, and they came out easily. When the way was clear she stepped through and found her feet upon a downward-sloping ramp of smooth stone. She cleared the rubble away from the hole in the wall, and enlarged it enough for a quick passage; for when she came back this way—if she did—it might well be that she would come very fast.

At the bottom of the slope she dropped to her knees on the cold floor and felt about. Her fingers traced the outline of a circle, the veriest crack in the stone. She felt until she found the ring in its center. That ring was of the coldest metal she had ever known, and the smoothest. She could put no name to it. The daylight had never shone upon such metal.

She tugged. The stone was reluctant, and at last she took her sword in her teeth and put both hands to the lifting. Even then it taxed the limit of her strength, and she was strong as many men. But at last it rose, with the strangest sighing sound, and a little prickle of goose-flesh rippled over her.

Now she took the sword back into her hand and knelt on the rim of the invisible blackness below. She had gone this path once before and once only, and never thought to find any necessity in life strong enough to drive her down again. The way was the strangest she had ever known. There was, she thought, no such passage in all the world save here. It had not been built for human feet to travel. It had not been built for feet at all. It was a narrow, polished shaft that

cork-screwed round and round. A snake might have slipped in it and gone shooting down, round and round in dizzy circles—but no snake on earth was big enough to fill that shaft. No human travelers had worn the sides of the spiral so smooth, and she did not care to speculate on what creatures had polished it so, through what ages of passage.

She might never have made that first trip down, nor anyone after her, had not some unknown human hacked the notches which made it possible to descend slowly; that is, she thought it must have been a human. At any rate, the notches were roughly shaped for hands and feet, and spaced not too far apart; but who and when and how she could not even guess. As to the beings who made the shaft, in long-forgotten ages—well, there were devils on earth before man, and the world was very old.

She turned on her face and slid feet-first into the curving tunnel. That first time she and Gervase had gone down in sweating terror of what lay below, and with devils tugging at their heels. Now she slid easily, not bothering to find toeholds, but slipping swiftly round and round the long spirals with only her hands to break the speed when she went too fast. Round and round she went, round and round.

It was a long way down. Before she had gone very far the curious dizziness she had known before came over her again, a dizziness not entirely induced by the spirals she whirled around, but a deeper, atomic unsteadiness as if not only she but also the substances around her were shifting. There was something queer about the angles of those curves. She was no scholar in geometry or aught else, but she felt intuitively that the bend and slant of the way she went were somehow outside any other angles or bends she had ever known. They led into the unknown and the dark, but it seemed to her obscurely that they led into deeper darkness and mystery than the merely physical, as if, though she could not put it clearly even into thoughts, the peculiar and exact lines of the tunnel had been carefully angled to lead through poly-dimensional space as well as through the underground—perhaps through time, too. She did not know she was thinking such things; but all about her was a blurred dizziness as she shot down and round, and she knew that the way she went took her on a stranger journey than any other way she had ever traveled.

Down, and down. She was sliding fast, but she knew how long it would be. On that first trip they had taken alarm as the passage spiraled so endlessly and with thoughts of the long climb back had tried to stop before it was too late. They had found it impossible. Once embarked, there was no halting. She had tried, and such waves of sick blurring had come over her that she came near to unconsciousness. It was as if she had tried to halt some inexorable process of nature, half finished. They could only go on. The very atoms of their bodies shrieked in rebellion against a reversal of the change.

And the way up, when they returned, had not been difficult. They had had visions of a back-breaking climb up interminable curves, but again the uncanny difference of those angles from those they knew was manifested. In a queer way they seemed to defy gravity, or perhaps led through some way outside the power of it. They had been sick and dizzy on the return, as on the way down, but through the clouds of that confusion it had seemed to them that they slipped as easily up the shaft as they had gone down; or perhaps that, once in the tunnel, there was neither up nor down.

THE passage leveled gradually. This was the worst part for a human to travel, though it must have eased the speed of whatever beings the shaft was made for. It was too narrow for her to turn in, and she had to lever herself face down and feet first, along the horizontal smoothness of the floor, pushing with her hands. She was glad when her questing heels met open space and she slid from the mouth of the shaft and stood upright in the dark.

Here she paused to collect herself. Yes, this was the beginning of the long passage she and Father Gervase had traveled on that long-ago journey of exploration. By the veriest accident they had found the place, and only the veriest bravado had brought them thus far. He had gone on a greater distance than she—she was younger then, and more amenable to authority—and had come back white-faced in the torchlight and hurried her up the shaft again.

She went on carefully, feeling her way, remembering what she herself had seen in the darkness a little farther on, wondering in spite of herself, and with a tiny catch at her heart, what it was that had sent Father Gervase so hastily back. She had never been entirely satisfied with his explanations. It had been about here—or was it a little farther on? The stillness was like a roaring in her ears.

Then ahead of her the darkness moved. It was just that—a vast, imponderable shifting of the solid dark. Jesu! This was new! She gripped the cross at her throat with one hand and her sword-hilt with the other. Then it was upon her, striking like a hurricane, whirling her against the walls and shrieking in her ears like a thousand wind-devils—a wild cyclone of the dark that buffeted her mercilessly and tore at her flying hair and raved in her ears with the myriad voices of all lost things crying in the night. The voices were piteous in their terror and loneliness. Tears came to her eyes even as she shivered with nameless dread, for the whirlwind was alive with a dreadful instinct, an animate thing sweeping through the dark of the underground; an unholy thing that made her flesh crawl even though it touched her to the heart with its pitiful little lost voices wailing in the wind where no wind could possibly be.

And then it was gone. In that one flash of an instant it vanished, leaving no whisper to commemorate its passage. Only in the heart of it could one hear the sad little voices wailing or the wild shriek of the wind. She found herself standing stunned, her sword yet gripped futilely in one hand and the tears running down her face. Poor little lost voices, wailing. She wiped the tears away with a shaking hand and set her teeth hard against the weakness of reaction that flooded her. Yet it was a good five minutes before she could force herself on. After a few steps her knees ceased to tremble.

The floor was dry and smooth underfoot. It sloped a little downward, and she wondered into what unplumbed deeps she had descended by now. The silence had fallen heavily again, and she found herself straining for some other sound than the soft padding of her own boots. Then her foot slipped in sudden wetness. She bent, exploring fingers outstretched, feeling without reason that the wetness would be red if she could see it. But her fingers traced the immense outline of a footprint—splayed and three-toed like a frog's, but of monster size. It was a fresh footprint. She had a vivid flash of memory—that thing she had glimpsed in the torchlight on the other trip down. But she had had light then, and now she was blind in the dark, the creature's natural habitat. . . .

For a moment she was not Jirel of Joiry, vengeful fury on the trail of a devilish weapon, but a frightened woman alone in the unholy dark. That memory had been so vivid. . . . Then she saw Guillaume's scornful, laughing face again, the little beard dark along the line of his jaw, the strong teeth white with his laughter; and something hot and sustaining swept over her like a thin flame, and she was Joiry again, vengeful and resolute. She went on more slowly, her sword swinging in a semicircle before every third step, that she might not be surprized too suddenly by some nightmare monster clasping her in smothering arms. But the flesh crept upon her unprotected back.

THE smooth passage went on and on. She could feel the cold walls on either hand, and her upswung sword grazed the roof. It was like crawling through some worm's tunnel, blindly under the weight of countless tons of earth. She felt the pressure of it above and about her, overwhelming, and found herself praying that the end of this tunnel-crawling might come soon, whatever the end might bring.

But when it came it was a stranger thing than she had ever dreamed. Abruptly she felt the immense, imponderable oppression cease. No longer was she conscious of the tons of earth pressing about her. The walls had fallen away and her feet struck a sudden rubble instead of the smooth floor. But the darkness that had bandaged her eyes was changed too, indescribably. It was no longer darkness, but void; not an absence of light, but simple nothingness. Abysses opened around her, yet she could see nothing. She only knew that she stood at the threshold of some immense space, and sensed nameless things about her, and battled vainly against that nothingness which was all her straining eyes could see. And at her throat something constricted painfully.

She lifted her hand and found the chain of her crucifix taut and vibrant around her neck. At that she smiled a little grimly, for she began to understand. The crucifix. She found her hand shaking despite herself, but she unfastened the chain and dropped the cross to the ground. Then she gasped.

All about her, as suddenly as the awakening from a dream, the nothingness had opened out into undreamed-of distances. She stood high on a hilltop under a sky spangled with strange stars. Below she caught glimpses of misty plains and valleys with mountain peaks rising far away. And at her feet a ravening circle of small, slavering, blind things leaped with clashing teeth.

They were obscene and hard to distinguish against the darkness of the hillside, and the noise they made was revolting. Her sword swung up of itself, almost, and slashed furiously at the little dark horrors leaping up around her legs. They died squashily, splattering her bare thighs with unpleasantness, and after a few had gone silent under the blade the rest fled into the dark with quick, frightened pantings, their feet making a queer splashing noise on the stones.

Jirel gathered a handful of the coarse grass which grew there and wiped her legs of the obscene splatters, looking about with quickened breath upon this land so unholy that one who bore a cross might not even see it. Here, if anywhere, one might find a weapon such as she sought. Behind her in the hillside was the low tunnel opening from which she had emerged. Overhead the strange stars shone. She did not recognize a single constellation, and if the brighter sparks

were planets they were strange ones, tinged with violet and green and yellow. One was vividly crimson, like a point of fire. Far out over the rolling land below she could discern a mighty column of light. It did not blaze, nor illuminate the dark about. It cast no shadows. It simply was a great pillar of luminance towering high in the night. It seemed artificial—perhaps man-made, though she scarcely dared hope for men here.

She had half expected, despite her brave words, to come out upon the storied and familiar red-hot pave of hell, and this pleasant, starlit land surprized her and made her more wary. The things that built the tunnel could not have been human. She had no right to expect men here. She was a little stunned by finding open sky so far underground, though she was intelligent enough to realize that however she had come, she was not underground now. No cavity in the earth could contain this starry sky. She came of a credulous age, and she accepted her surroundings without too much questioning, though she was a little disappointed, if the truth were known, in the pleasantness of the mistily starlit place. The fiery streets of hell would have been a likelier locality in which to find a weapon against Guillaume.

When she had cleansed her sword on the grass and wiped her legs clean, she turned slowly down the hill. The distant column beckoned her, and after a moment of indecision she turned toward it. She had no time to waste, and this was the likeliest place to find what she sought.

The coarse grass brushed her legs and whispered round her feet. She stumbled now and then on the rubble, for the hill was steep, but she reached the bottom without mishap, and struck out across the meadows toward that blaze of far-away brilliance. It seemed to her that she walked more lightly, somehow. The grass scarcely bent underfoot, and she found she could take long sailing strides like one who runs with wings on his heels. It felt like a dream. The gravity pull of the place must have been less than she was accustomed to, but she only knew that she was skimming over the ground with amazing speed.

Traveling so, she passed through the meadows over the strange, coarse grass, over a brook or two that spoke endlessly to itself in a curious language that was almost speech, certainly not the usual gurgle of earth's running water. Once she ran into a blotch of darkness, like some pocket of void in the air, and struggled through gasping and blinking outraged eyes. She was beginning to realize that the land was not so innocently normal as it looked.

On and on she went, at that surprizing speed, while the meadows skimmed past beneath her flying feet and gradually the light drew nearer. She saw now that it was a round tower of sheeted luminance, as if walls of solid flame rose up from the ground. Yet it seemed to be steady, nor did it cast any illumination upon the sky.

BEFORE much time had elapsed, with her dream-like speed she had almost reached her goal. The ground was becoming marshy underfoot, and presently the smell of swamps rose in her nostrils and she saw that between her and the light stretched a belt of unstable ground tufted with black reedy grass. Here and there she could see dim white blotches moving. They might be beasts, or only wisps of mist. The starlight was not very illuminating.

She began to pick her way carefully across the black, quaking morasses. Where the tufts of grass rose she found firmer ground, and she leaped from

clump to clump with that amazing lightness, so that her feet barely touched the black ooze. Here and there slow bubbles rose through the mud and broke thickly. She did not like the place.

Half-way across, she saw one of the white blotches approaching her with slow, erratic movements. It bumped along unevenly, and at first she thought it might be inanimate, its approach was so indirect and purposeless. Then it blundered nearer, with that queer bumpy gait, making sucking noises in the ooze and splashing as it came. In the starlight she saw suddenly what it was, and for an instant her heart paused and sickness rose overwhelmingly in her throat. It was a woman—a beautiful woman whose white bare body had the curves and loveliness of some marble statue. She was crouching like a frog, and as Jirel watched in stupefaction she straightened her legs abruptly and leaped as a frog leaps, only more clumsily, falling forward into the ooze a little distance beyond the watching woman. She did not seem to see Jirel. The mud-spattered face was blank. She blundered on through the mud in awkward leaps. Jirel watched until the woman was no more than a white wandering blur in the dark, and above the shock of that sight pity was rising, and uncomprehending resentment against whatever had brought so lovely a creature into this—into blundering in frog leaps aimlessly through the mud, with empty mind and blind, staring eyes. For the second time that night she knew the sting of unaccustomed tears as she went on.

The sight, though, had given her reassurance. The human form was not unknown here. There might be leathery devils with hoofs and horns, such as she still half expected, but she would not be alone in her humanity; though if all the rest were as piteously mindless as the one she had seen—she did not follow that thought. It was too unpleasant. She was glad when the marsh was past and she need not see any longer the awkward white shapes bumping along through the dark.

She struck out across the narrow space which lay between her and the tower. She saw now that it was a building, and that the light composed it. She could not understand that, but she saw it. Walls and columns outlined the tower, solid sheets of light with definite boundaries, not radiant. As she came nearer she saw that it was in motion, apparently spurting up from some source underground as if the light illuminated sheets of water rushing upward under great pressure. Yet she felt intuitively that it was not water, but incarnate light.

She came forward hesitantly, gripping her sword. The area around the tremendous pillar was paved with something black and smooth that did not reflect the light. Out of it sprang the uprushing walls of brilliance with their sharply defined edges. The magnitude of the thing dwarfed her to infinitesimal size. She stared upward with undazzled eyes, trying to understand. If there could be such a thing as solid, non-radiating light, this was it.

4

She was very near under the mighty tower before she could see the details of the building clearly. They were strange to her—great pillars and arches around the base, and one stupendous portal, all molded out of the rushing, prisoned light. She turned toward the opening after a moment, for the light had a tangible look. She did not believe she could have walked through it even had she dared.

When that tremendous portal arched

over her she peered in, affrighted by the very size of the place. She thought she could hear the hiss and spurt of the light surging upward. She was looking into a mighty globe inside, a hall shaped like the interior of a bubble, though the curve was so vast she was scarcely aware of it. And in the very center of the globe floated a light. Jirel blinked. A light, dwelling in a bubble of light. It glowed there in midair with a pale, steady flame that was somehow alive and animate, and brighter than the serene illumination of the building, for it hurt her eyes to look at it directly.

She stood on the threshold and stared, not quite daring to venture in. And as she hesitated a change came over the light. A flush of rose tinged its pallor. The rose deepened and darkened until it took on the color of blood. And the shape underwent strange changes. It lengthened, drew itself out narrowly, split at the bottom into two branches, put out two tendrils from the top. The blood-red paled again, and the light somehow lost its brilliance, receded into the depths of the thing that was forming. Jirel clutched her sword and forgot to breathe, watching. The light was taking on the shape of a human being—of a woman—of a tall woman in mail, her red hair tousled and her eyes staring straight into the duplicate eyes at the portal. . . .

"Welcome," said the Jirel suspended in the center of the globe, her voice deep and resonant and clear in spite of the distance between them. Jirel at the door held her breath, wondering and afraid. This was herself, in every detail, a mirrored Jirel—that was it, a Jirel mirrored upon a surface which blazed and smoldered with barely repressed light, so that the eyes gleamed with it and the whole figure seemed to hold its shape by an effort, only by that effort restraining itself from resolving into pure, formless light again. But the voice was not her own. It shook and resounded with a knowledge as alien as the light-built walls. It mocked her. It said,

"Welcome! Enter into the portals, woman!"

She looked up warily at the rushing walls about her. Instinctively she drew back.

"Enter, enter!" urged that mocking voice from her own mirrored lips. And there was a note in it she did not like.

"Enter!" cried the voice again, this time a command.

Jirel's eyes narrowed. Something intuitive warned her back, and yet—she drew the dagger she had thrust in her belt and with a quick motion she tossed it into the great globe-shaped hall. It struck the floor without a sound, and a brilliant light flared up around it, so brilliant she could not look upon what was happening; but it seemed to her that the knife expanded, grew large and nebulous and ringed with dazzling light. In less time than it takes to tell, it had faded out of sight as if the very atoms which composed it had flown apart and dispersed in the golden glow of that mighty bubble. The dazzle faded with the knife, leaving Jirel staring dazedly at a bare floor.

That other Jirel laughed, a rich, resonant laugh of scorn and malice.

"Stay out, then," said the voice. "You've more intelligence than I thought. Well, what would you here?"

Jirel found her voice with an effort.

"I seek a weapon," she said, "a weapon against a man I so hate that upon earth there is none terrible enough for my need."

"You so hate him, eh?" mused the voice.

"With all my heart!"

"With all your heart!" echoed the

voice, and there was an undernote of laughter in it that she did not understand. The echoes of that mirth ran round and round the great globe. Jirel felt her cheeks burn with resentment against some implication in the derision which she could not put a name to. When the echoes of the laugh had faded the voice said indifferently,

"Give the man what you find at the black temple in the lake. I make you a gift of it."

The lips that were Jirel's twisted into a laugh of purest mockery; then all about that figure so perfectly her own the light flared out. She saw the outlines melting fluidly as she turned her dazzled eyes away. Before the echoes of that derision had died, a blinding, formless light burned once more in the midst of the bubble.

JIREL turned and stumbled away under the mighty column of the tower, a hand to her dazzled eyes. Not until she had reached the edge of the black, unreflecting circle that paved the ground around the pillar did she realize that she knew no way of finding the lake where her weapon lay. And not until then did she remember how fatal it is said to be to accept a gift from a demon. Buy it, or earn it, but never accept the gift. Well—she shrugged and stepped out upon the grass. She must surely be damned by now, for having ventured down of her own will into this curious place for such a purpose as hers. The soul can be lost but once.

She turned her face up to the strange stars and wondered in what direction her course lay. The sky looked blankly down upon her with its myriad meaningless eyes. A star fell as she watched, and in her superstitious soul she took it for an omen, and set off boldly over the dark meadows in the direction where the bright streak had faded. No swamps guarded the way here, and she was soon skimming along over the grass with that strange, dancing gait that the lightness of the place allowed her. And as she went she was remembering, as from long ago in some other far world, a man's arrogant mirth and the press of his mouth on hers. Hatred bubbled up hotly within her and broke from her lips in a little savage laugh of anticipation. What dreadful thing awaited her in the temple in the lake, what punishment from hell to be loosed by her own hands upon Guillaume? And though her soul was the price it cost her, she would count it a fair bargain if she could drive the laughter from his mouth and bring terror into the eyes that mocked her.

Thoughts like these kept her company for a long way upon her journey. She did not think to be lonely or afraid in the uncanny darkness across which no shadows fell from that mighty column behind her. The unchanging meadows flew past underfoot, lightly as meadows in a dream. It might almost have been that the earth moved instead of herself, so effortlessly did she go. She was sure now that she was heading in the right direction, for two more stars had fallen in the same arc across the sky.

The meadows were not untenanted. Sometimes she felt presences near her in the dark, and once she ran full-tilt into a nest of little yapping horrors like those on the hill-top. They lunged up about her with clicking teeth, mad with a blind ferocity, and she swung her sword in frantic circles, sickened by the noise of them lunging splashily through the grass and splattering her sword with their deaths. She beat them off and went on, fighting her own sickness, for she had never known anything quite so nauseating as these little monstrosities.

She crossed a brook that talked to itself in the darkness with that queer murmuring which came so near to speech, and a few strides beyond it she paused suddenly, feeling the ground tremble with the rolling thunder of hoofbeats approaching. She stood still, searching the dark anxiously, and presently the earth-shaking beat grew louder and she saw a white blur flung wide across the dimness to her left, and the sound of hoofs deepened and grew. Then out of the night swept a herd of snow-white horses. Magnificently they ran, manes tossing, tails streaming, feet pounding a rhythmic, heart-stirring roll along the ground. She caught her breath at the beauty of their motion. They swept by a little distance away, tossing their heads, spurning the ground with scornful feet.

But as they came abreast of her she saw one blunder a little and stumble against the next, and that one shook his head bewilderedly; and suddenly she realized that they were blind—all running so splendidly in a deeper dark than even she groped through. And she saw too their coats were roughened with sweat, and foam dripped from their lips, and their nostrils were flaring pools of scarlet. Now and again one stumbled from pure exhaustion. Yet they ran, frantically, blindly through the dark, driven by something outside their comprehension.

As the last one of all swept by her, sweat-crusted and staggering, she saw him toss his head high, spattering foam, and whinny shrilly to the stars. And it seemed to her that the sound was strangely articulate. Almost she heard the echoes of a name—"Julienne! Julienne!" —in that high, despairing sound. And the incongruity of it, the bitter despair, clutched at her heart so sharply that for the third time that night she knew the sting of tears.

The dreadful humanity of that cry echoed in her ears as the thunder died away. She went on, blinking back the tears for that beautiful blind creature, staggering with exhaustion, calling a girl's name hopelessly from a beast's throat into the blank darkness wherein it was for ever lost.

Then another star fell across the sky, and she hurried ahead, closing her mind to the strange, incomprehensible pathos that made an undernote of tears to the starry dark of this land. And the thought was growing in her mind that, though she had come into no brimstone pit where horned devils pranced over flames, yet perhaps it was after all a sort of hell through which she ran.

PRESENTLY in the distance she caught a glimmer of something bright. The ground dipped after that and she lost it, and skimmed through a hollow where pale things wavered away from her into the deeper dark. She never knew what they were, and was glad. When she came up onto higher ground again she saw it more clearly, an expanse of dim brilliance ahead. She hoped it was a lake, and ran more swiftly.

It *was* a lake—a lake that could never have existed outside some obscure hell like this. She stood on the brink doubtfully, wondering if this could be the place the light-devil had meant. Black, shining water stretched out before her, heaving gently with a motion unlike that of any water she had ever seen before. And in the depths of it, like fireflies caught in ice, gleamed myriad small lights. They were fixed there immovably, not stirring with the motion of the water. As she watched, something hissed above her and a streak of light split the dark air. She looked up in time to see something bright curving across the sky to fall without a

splash into the water, and small ripples of phosphorescence spread sluggishly toward the shore, where they broke at her feet with the queerest whispering sound, as if each succeeding ripple spoke the syllable of a word.

She looked up, trying to locate the origin of the falling lights, but the strange stars looked down upon her blankly. She bent and stared down into the center of the spreading ripples, and where the thing had fallen she thought a new light twinkled through the water. She could not determine what it was, and after a curious moment she gave the question up and began to cast about for the temple the light-devil had spoken of.

After a moment she thought she saw something dark in the center of the lake, and when she had stared for a few minutes it gradually became clearer, an arch of darkness against the starry background of the water. It might be a temple. She strolled slowly along the brim of the lake, trying to get a closer view of it, for the thing was no more than a darkness against the spangles of light, like some void in the sky where no stars shine. And presently she stumbled over something in the grass.

She looked down with startled yellow eyes, and saw a strange, indistinguishable darkness. It had solidity to the feel but scarcely to the eye, for she could not quite focus upon it. It was like trying to see something that did not exist save as a void, a darkness in the grass. It had the shape of a step, and when she followed with her eyes she saw that it was the beginning of a dim bridge stretching out over the lake, narrow and curved and made out of nothingness. It seemed to have no surface, and its edges were difficult to distinguish from the lesser gloom surrounding it. But the thing was tangible—an arch carved out of the solid dark—and it led out in the direction she wished to go. For she was naïvely sure now that the dim blot in the center of the lake was the temple she was searching for. The falling stars had guided her, and she could not have gone astray.

So she set her teeth and gripped her sword and put her foot upon the bridge. It was rock-firm under her, but scarcely more than a foot or so wide, and without rails. When she had gone a step or two she began to feel dizzy; for under her the water heaved with a motion that made her head swim, and the stars twinkled eerily in its depths. She dared not look away for fear of missing her footing on the narrow arch of darkness. It was like walking a bridge flung across the void, with stars underfoot and nothing but an unstable strip of nothingness to bear her up. Half-way across, the heaving of the water and the illusion of vast, constellated spaces beneath and the look her bridge had of being no more than empty space ahead, combined to send her head reeling; and as she stumbled on, the bridge seemed to be wavering with her, swinging in gigantic arcs across the starry void below.

Now she could see the temple more closely, though scarcely more clearly than from the shore. It looked to be no more than an outlined emptiness against the star-crowded brilliance behind it, etching its arches and columns of blankness upon the twinkling waters. The bridge came down in a long dim swoop to its doorway. Jirel took the last few yards at a reckless run and stopped breathless under the arch that made the temple's vague doorway. She stood there panting and staring about narrow-eyed, sword poised in her hand. For though the place was empty and very still she felt a presence even as she set her foot upon the floor of it.

She was staring about a little space of blankness in the starry lake. It seemed to be no more than that. She could see the walls and columns where they were outlined against the water and where they made darknesses in the star-flecked sky, but where there was only dark behind them she could see nothing. It was a tiny place, no more than a few square yards of emptiness upon the face of the twinkling waters. And in its center an image stood.

She stared at it in silence, feeling a curious compulsion growing within her, like a vague command from something outside herself. The image was of some substance of nameless black, unlike the material which composed the building, for even in the dark she could see it clearly. It was a semi-human figure, crouching forward with outthrust head, sexless and strange. Its one central eye was closed as if in rapture, and its mouth was pursed for a kiss. And though it was but an image and without even the semblance of life, she felt unmistakably the presence of something alive in the temple, something so alien and innominate that instinctively she drew away.

She stood there for a full minute, reluctant to enter the place where so alien a being dwelt, half conscious of that voiceless compulsion growing up within her. And slowly she became aware that all the lines and angles of the half-seen building were curved to make the image their center and focus. The very bridge swooped its long arc to complete the centering. As she watched, it seemed to her that through the arches of the columns even the stars in lake and sky were grouped in patterns which took the image for their focus. Every line and curve in the dim world seemed to sweep round toward the squatting thing before her with its closed eye and expectant mouth.

Gradually the universal focusing of lines began to exert its influence upon her. She took a hesitant step forward without realizing the motion. But that step was all the dormant urge within her needed. With her one motion forward the compulsion closed down upon her with whirlwind impetuosity. Helplessly she felt herself advancing, helplessly with one small, sane portion of her mind she realized the madness that was gripping her, the blind, irresistible urge to do what every visible line in the temple's construction was made to compel. With stars swirling around her she advanced across the floor and laid her hands upon the rounded shoulders of the image—the sword, forgotten, making a sort of accolade against its hunched neck—and lifted her red head and laid her mouth blindly against the pursed lips of the image.

In a dream she took that kiss. In a dream of dizziness and confusion she seemed to feel the iron-cold lips stirring under hers. And through the union of that kiss—warm-blooded woman with image of nameless stone — through the meeting of their mouths something entered into her very soul; something cold and stunning; something alien beyond any words. It lay upon her shuddering soul like some frigid weight from the void, a bubble holding something unthinkably alien and dreadful. She could feel the heaviness of it upon some intangible part of her that shrank from the touch. It was like the weight of remorse or despair, only far colder and stranger and—somehow—more ominous, as if this weight were but the egg from which things might hatch too dreadful to put even into thoughts.

The moment of the kiss could have been no longer than a breath's space, but to her it was timeless. In a dream she

felt the compulsion falling from her at last. In a dim dream she dropped her hands from its shoulders, finding the sword heavy in her grasp and staring dully at it for a while before clarity began its return to her cloudy mind. When she became completely aware of herself once more she was standing with slack body and dragging head before the blind, rapturous image, that dead weight upon her heart as dreary as an old sorrow, and more coldly ominous than anything she could find words for.

And with returning clarity the most staggering terror came over her, swiftly and suddenly—terror of the image and the temple of darkness, and the coldly spangled lake and of the whole, wide, dim, dreadful world about her. Desperately she longed for home again, even the red fury of hatred and the press of Guillaume's mouth and the hot arrogance of his eyes again. Anything but this. She found herself running without knowing why. Her feet skimmed over the narrow bridge lightly as a gull's wings dipping the water. In a brief instant the starry void of the lake flashed by beneath her and the solid earth was underfoot. She saw the great column of light far away across the dark meadows and beyond it a hill-top rising against the stars. And she ran.

She ran with terror at her heels and devils howling in the wind her own speed made. She ran from her own curiously alien body, heavy with its weight of inexplicable doom. She passed through the hollow where pale things wavered away, she fled over the uneven meadows in a frenzy of terror. She ran and ran, in those long light bounds the lesser gravity allowed her, fleeter than a deer, and her own panic choked in her throat and that weight upon her soul dragged at her too drearily for tears. She fled to escape it, and could not; and the ominous certainty that she carried something too dreadful to think of grew and grew.

For a long while she skimmed over the grass, tirelessly, wing-heeled, her red hair flying. The panic died after a while, but that sense of heavy disaster did not die. She felt somehow that tears would ease her, but something in the frigid darkness of her soul froze her tears in the ice of that gray and alien chill.

And gradually, through the inner dark, a fierce anticipation took form in her mind. Revenge upon Guillaume! She had taken from the temple only a kiss, so it was that which she must deliver to him. And savagely she exulted in the thought of what that kiss would release upon him, unsuspecting. She did not know, but it filled her with fierce joy to guess.

SHE had passed the column and skirted the morass where the white, blundering forms still bumped along awkwardly through the ooze, and was crossing the coarse grass toward the nearing hill when the sky began to pale along the horizon. And with that pallor a fresh terror took hold upon her, a wild horror of daylight in this unholy land. She was not sure if it was the light itself she so dreaded, or what that light would reveal in the dark stretches she had traversed so blindly—what unknown horrors she had skirted in the night. But she knew instinctively that if she valued her sanity she must be gone before the light had risen over the land. And she redoubled her efforts, spurring her wearying limbs to yet more skimming speed. But it would be a close race, for already the stars were blurring out, and a flush of curious green was broadening along the sky, and around her the air was turning to a vague, unpleasant gray.

She toiled up the steep hillside breathlessly. When she was half-way up, her own shadow began to take form upon the rocks, and it was unfamiliar and dreadfully significant of something just outside her range of understanding. She averted her eyes from it, afraid that at any moment the meaning might break upon her outraged brain.

She could see the top of the hill above her, dark against the paling sky, and she toiled up in frantic haste, clutching her sword and feeling that if she had to look in the full light upon the dreadful little abominations that had snapped around her feet when she first emerged she would collapse into screaming hysteria.

The cave-mouth yawned before her, invitingly black, a refuge from the dawning light behind her. She knew an almost irresistible desire to turn and look back from this vantage-point across the land she had traversed, and gripped her sword hard to conquer the perversive longing. There was a scuffling in the rocks at her feet, and she set her teeth in her underlip and swung viciously in brief arcs, without looking down. She heard small squeakings and the splashy sound of feet upon the stones, and felt her blade shear thrice through semi-solidity, to the click of little vicious teeth. Then they broke and ran off over the hillside, and she stumbled on, choking back the scream that wanted so fiercely to break from her lips.

She fought that growing desire all the way up to the cave-mouth, for she knew that if she gave way she would never cease shrieking until her throat went raw.

Blood was trickling from her bitten lip with the effort at silence when she reached the cave. And there, twinkling upon the stones, lay something small and bright and dearly familiar. With a sob of relief she bent and snatched up the crucifix she had torn from her throat when she came out into this land. And as her fingers shut upon it a vast, protecting darkness swooped around her. Gasping with relief, she groped her way the step or two that separated her from the cave.

Dark lay like a blanket over her eyes, and she welcomed it gladly, remembering how her shadow had lain so awfully upon the hillside as she climbed, remembering the first rays of savage sunlight beating upon her shoulders. She stumbled through the blackness, slowly getting control again over her shaking body and laboring lungs, slowly stilling the panic that the dawning day had roused so inexplicably within her. And as that terror died, the dull weight upon her spirit became strong again. She had all but forgotten it in her panic, but now the impending and unknown dreadfulness grew heavier and more oppressive in the darkness of the underground, and she groped along in a dull stupor of her own depression, slow with the weight of the strange doom she carried.

NOTHING barred her way. In the dullness of her stupor she scarcely realized it, or expected any of the vague horrors that peopled the place to leap out upon her. Empty and unmenacing, the way stretched before her blindly stumbling feet. Only once did she hear the sound of another presence—the rasp of hoarse breathing and the scrape of a scaly hide against the stone—but it must have been outside the range of her own passage, for she encountered nothing.

When she had come to the end and a cold wall rose up before her, it was scarcely more than automatic habit that made her search along it with groping hand until she came to the mouth of the shaft. It sloped gently up into the dark.

She crawled in, trailing her sword, until the rising incline and lowering roof forced her down upon her face. Then with toes and fingers she began to force herself up the spiral, slippery way.

Before she had gone very far she was advancing without effort, scarcely realizing that it was against gravity she moved. The curious dizziness of the shaft had come over her, the strange feeling of change in the very substance of her body, and through the cloudy numbness of it she felt herself sliding round and round the spirals, without effort. Again, obscurely, she had the feeling that in the peculiar angles of this shaft was neither up nor down. And for a long while the dizzy circling went on.

When the end came at last, and she felt her fingers gripping the edge of that upper opening which lay beneath the floor of Joiry's lowest dungeons, she heaved herself up warily and lay for awhile on the cold floor in the dark, while slowly the clouds of dizziness passed from her mind, leaving only that ominous weight within. When the darkness had ceased to circle about her, and the floor steadied, she got up dully and swung the cover back over the opening, her hands shuddering from the feel of the cold, smooth ring which had never seen daylight.

When she turned from this task she was aware of the reason for the lessening in the gloom around her. A guttering light outlined the hole in the wall from which she had pulled the stones—was it a century ago? The brilliance all but blinded her after her long sojourn through blackness, and she stood there awhile, swaying a little, one hand to her eyes, before she went out into the familiar torchlight she knew waited her beyond. Father Gervase, she was sure, anxiously waiting her return. But even he had not dared to follow her through the hole in the wall, down to the brink of the shaft.

Somehow she felt that she should be giddy with relief at this safe homecoming, back to humanity again. But as she stumbled over the upward slope toward light and safety she was conscious of no more than the dullness of whatever unreleased horror it was which still lay so ominously upon her stunned soul.

She came through the gaping hole in the masonry into the full glare of torches awaiting her, remembering with a wry inward smile how wide she had made the opening in anticipation of flight from something dreadful when she came back that way. Well, there was no flight from the horror she bore within her. It seemed to her that her heart was slowing, too, missing a beat now and then and staggering like a weary runner.

She came out into the torchlight, stumbling with exhaustion, her mouth scarlet from the blood of her bitten lip and her bare greaved legs and bare sword-blade foul with the deaths of those little horrors that swarmed around the cave-mouth. From the tangle of red hair her eyes stared out with a bleak, frozen, inward look, as of one who has seen nameless things. That keen, steel-bright beauty which had been hers was as dull and fouled as her sword-blade, and at the look in her eyes Father Gervase shuddered and crossed himself.

5

THEY were waiting for her in an uneasy group—the priest anxious and dark, Guillaume splendid in the torchlight, tall and arrogant, a handful of men-at-arms holding the guttering lights and shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. When she saw Guillaume the light that flared up in her eyes blotted out for a moment the bleak dreadfulness behind

them, and her slowing heart leaped like a spurred horse, sending the blood riotously through her veins. Guillaume, magnificent in his armor, leaning upon his sword and staring down at her from his scornful height, the little black beard jutting. Guillaume, to whom Joiry had fallen. Guillaume.

That which she carried at the core of her being was heavier than anything else in the world, so heavy she could scarcely keep her knees from bending, so heavy her heart labored under its weight. Almost irresistibly she wanted to give way beneath it, to sink down and down under the crushing load, to lie prone and vanquished in the ice-gray, bleak place she was so dimly aware of through the clouds that were rising about her. But there was Guillaume, grim and grinning, and she hated him so very bitterly—she must make the effort. She must, at whatever cost, for she was coming to know that death lay in wait for her if she bore this burden long, that it was a two-edged weapon which could strike at its wielder if the blow were delayed too long. She knew this through the dim mists that were thickening in her brain, and she put all her strength into the immense effort it cost to cross the floor toward him. She stumbled a little, and made one faltering step and then another, and dropped her sword with a clang as she lifted her arms to him.

He caught her strongly, in a hard, warm clasp, and she heard his laugh triumphant and hateful as he bent his head to take the kiss she was raising her mouth to offer. He must have seen, in that last moment before their lips met, the savage glare of victory in her eyes, and been startled. But he did not hesitate. His mouth was heavy upon hers.

It was a long kiss. She felt him stiffen in her arms. She felt a coldness in the lips upon hers, and slowly the dark weight of what she bore lightened, lifted, cleared away from her cloudy mind. Strength flowed back through her richly. The whole world came alive to her once more. Presently she loosed his slack arms and stepped away, looking up into his face with a keen and dreadful triumph upon her own.

She saw the ruddiness of him draining away, and the rigidity of stone coming over his scarred features. Only his eyes remained alive, and there was torment in them, and understanding. She was glad—she had wanted him to understand what it cost to take Joiry's kiss unbidden. She smiled thinly into his tortured eyes, watching. And she saw something cold and alien seeping through him, permeating him slowly with some unnamable emotion which no man could ever have experienced before. She could not name it, but she saw it in his eyes—some dreadful emotion never made for flesh and blood to know, some iron despair such as only an unguessable being from the gray, formless void could ever have felt before—too hideously alien for any human creature to endure. Even she shuddered from the dreadful, cold bleakness looking out of his eyes, and knew as she watched that there must be many emotions and many fears and joys too far outside man's comprehension for any being of flesh to undergo, and live. Grayly she saw it spreading through him, and the very substance of his body shuddered under that iron weight.

And now came a visible, physical change. Watching, she was aghast to think that in her own body and upon her own soul she had born the seed of this dreadful flowering, and did not wonder that her heart had slowed under the unbearable weight of it. He was standing rigidly with arms half bent, just as he

stood when she slid from his embrace. And now great shudders began to go over him, as if he were wavering in the torchlight, some gray-faced wraith in armor with torment in his eyes. She saw the sweat beading his forehead. She saw a trickle of blood from his mouth, as if he had bitten through his lip in the agony of this new, incomprehensible emotion. Then a last shiver went over him violently, and he flung up his head, the little curling beard jutting ceilingward and the muscles of his strong throat corded, and from his lips broke a long, low cry of such utter, inhuman strangeness that Jirel felt coldness rippling through her veins and she put up her hands to her ears to shut it out. It meant something—it expressed some dreadful emotion that was neither sorrow nor despair nor anger, but infinitely alien and infinitely sad. Then his long legs buckled at the knees and he dropped with a clatter of mail and lay still on the stone floor.

They knew he was dead. That was unmistakable in the way he lay. Jirel stood very still, looking down upon him, and strangely it seemed to her that all the lights in the world had gone out. A moment before he had been so big and vital, so magnificent in the torchlight—she could still feel his kiss upon her mouth, and the hard warmth of his arms. . . .

Suddenly and blindingly it came upon her what she had done. She knew now why such heady violence had flooded her whenever she thought of him—knew why the light-devil in her own form had laughed so derisively—knew the price she must pay for taking a gift from a demon. She knew that there was no light anywhere in the world, now that Guillaume was gone.

Father Gervase took her arm gently. She shook him off with an impatient shrug and dropped to one knee beside Guillaume's body, bending her head so that the red hair fell forward to hide her tears.

Another weird adventure of Jirel of Joiry, "Black God's Shadow," will appear in the December issue of WEIRD TALES

The Seven Geases

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

A fascinating story of the adventures of a huntsman in the weird caverns of the Voormis—a tale of the god Tsathoggua

THE Lord Ralibar Vooz, high magistrate of Commoriom and third cousin to King Homquat, had gone forth with six-and-twenty of his most valorous retainers in quest of such game as was afforded by the black Eiglophian Mountains. Leaving to lesser sportsmen the great sloths and vampire-bats of the intermediate jungle, as well as the small but noxious dinosauria, Ralibar Vooz and his followers had pushed rapidly ahead and had covered the distance between the Hyperborean capital and their objective in a day's march. The glassy scaurs and grim ramparts of Mount Voormithadreth, highest and most formidable of the Eiglophians, had beetled above them, wedging the sun with dark scoriac peaks at mid-afternoon, and walling the blazonries of sunset wholly from view. They had spent the night beneath its lowermost crags, keeping a ceaseless watch, piling dead branches on their fires, and hearing on the grisly heights above them the wild and dog-like ululations of those subhuman savages, the Voormis for which the mountain was named. Also, they heard the bellowing of an alpine catoblepas pursued by the Voormis, and the mad snarling of a saber-toothed tiger assailed and dragged down; and Ralibar Vooz had deemed that these noises boded well for the morrow's hunting.

He and his men rose betimes; and having breakfasted on their provisions of dried bear-meat and a dark sour wine that was noted for its invigorative qualities, they began immediately the ascent of the mountain, whose upper precipices were hollow with caves occupied by the Voormis. Ralibar Vooz had hunted these creatures before; and a certain room of his house in Commoriom was arrased with their thick and shaggy pelts. They were usually deemed the most dangerous of the Hyperborean fauna; and the mere climbing of Voormithadreth, even without the facing of its inhabitants, would have been a feat attended by more than sufficient peril: but Ralibar Vooz, having tasted of such sport, could now satisfy himself with nothing tamer.

● The word geas, though used by James Branch Cabell and other writers, is entirely Celtic and has not yet found its way into the dictionaries of English. Gaelic dictionaries give it the meaning, "oath and adjuration or religious vow." It is used in expressions that translated would become, "I solemnly charge you." Around this word Clark Ashton Smith has written an enthralling tale in the story presented herewith, "The Seven Geases." We commend this story to all lovers of fantastic fiction. On the opposite page we give Mr. Smith's own conception of the god Tsathoggua, who appears as a character in the story.

He and his followers were well armed and accoutered. Some of the men bore coils of rope and grappling-hooks to be employed in the escalade of the steeper crags. Some carried heavy crossbows; and many were equipped with long-handled and saber-bladed bills which, from experience, had proved the most effective weapons in close-range fighting with the Voormis. The whole party was variously studded with auxiliary knives, throwing-darts, two-handed simitars, maces, bodkins, and saw-toothed axes. The men were all clad in jerkins and hose of dinosaur-leather, and were shod with brazen-spiked buskins. Ralibar Vooz himself wore a light suiting of copper chain-mail, which, flexible as cloth, in no wise impeded his movements. In addition he carried a buckler of mammoth-hide with a long bronze spike in its center that could be used as a thrusting-sword; and, being a man of huge stature and strength, his shoulders and baldric were hung with a whole arsenal of weaponries.

The mountain was of volcanic origin, though its four craters were supposedly all extinct. For hours the climbers toiled upward on the fearsome scarps of black lava and obsidian, seeing the sheerer heights above them recede interminably into a cloudless zenith, as if not to be approached by man. Far faster than they the sun climbed, blazing torridly upon them and heating the rocks till their hands were scorched as if by the walls of a furnace. But Ralibar Vooz, eager to flesh his weapons, would permit no halting in the shady chasms nor under the scant umbrage of rare junipers.

That day, however, it seemed that the Voormis were not abroad upon Mount Voormithadreth. No doubt they had feasted too well during the night, when their hunting cries had been heard by the Commorians. Perhaps it would be

necessary to invade the warren of caves in the loftier crags: a procedure none too palatable even for a sportsman of such hardihood as Ralibar Vooz. Few of these caverns could be reached by men without the use of ropes; and the Voormis, who were possessed of quasi-human cunning, would hurl blocks and rubble upon the heads of the assailants. Most of the caves were narrow and darksome, thus putting at a grave disadvantage the hunters who entered them; and the Voormis would fight redoubtably in defense of their young and their females, who dwelt in the inner recesses; and the females were fiercer and more pernicious, if possible, than the males.

Such matters as these were debated by Ralibar Vooz and his henchmen as the escalade became more arduous and hazardous, and they saw far above them the pitted mouths of the lower dens. Tales were told of brave hunters who had gone into those dens and had not returned; and much was said of the vile feeding-habits of the Voormis and the uses to which their captives were put before death and after it. Also, much was said regarding the genesis of the Voormis, who were popularly believed to be the offspring of women and certain atrocious creatures that had come forth in primal days from a tenebrous cavern-world in the bowels of Voormithadreth. Some-

where beneath that four-coned mountain, the sluggish and baleful god Tsathoggua, who had come down from Saturn in years immediately following the Earth's creation, was fabled to reside; and during the rite of worship at his black altars, the devotees were always careful to orient themselves toward Voormithadreth. Other and more doubtful beings than Tsathoggua slept below the extinct volcanoes, or ranged and ravened throughout that hidden underworld; but of these beings few men, other than the more adept or abandoned wizards, professed to know anything at all.

RALIBAR VOOZ, who had a thoroughly modern disdain of the supernatural, avowed his skepticism in no equivocal terms when he heard his henchmen regaling each other with these antique legendries. He swore with many ribald blasphemies that there were no gods anywhere, above or under Voormithadreth. As for the Voormis themselves, they were indeed a misbegotten species; but it was hardly necessary, in explaining their generation, to go beyond the familiar laws of nature. They were merely the remnant of a low and degraded tribe of aborigines, who, sinking further into brutehood, had sought refuge in those volcanic fastnesses after the coming of the true Hyperboreans.

Certain grizzled veterans of the party shook their heads and muttered at these heresies; but because of their respect for the high rank and prowess of Ralibar Vooz, they did not venture to gainsay him openly.

After several hours of heroic climbing, the hunters came within measurable distance of those nether caves. Below them now, in a vast and dizzying prospect, were the wooded hills and fair, fertile plains of Hyperborea. They were alone in a world of black, riven rock, with innumerable precipices and chasms above, beneath and on all sides. Directly overhead, in the face of an almost perpendicular cliff, were three of the cavern-mouths, which had the aspect of volcanic fumaroles. Much of the cliff was glazed with obsidian, and there were few ledges or hand-grips. It seemed that even the Voormis, agile as apes, could scarcely climb that wall; and Ralibar Vooz, after studying it with a strategic eye, decided that the only feasible approach to the dens was from above. A diagonal crack, running from a shelf just below them to the summit, no doubt afforded ingress and egress to their occupants.

First, however, it was necessary to gain the precipice above: a difficult and precarious feat in itself. At one side of the long talus on which the hunters were standing, there was a chimney that wound upward in the wall, ceasing thirty feet from the top and leaving a sheer, smooth surface. Working along the chimney to its upper end, a good alpinist could hurl his rope and grappling-hook to the summit-edge.

The advisability of bettering their present vantage was now emphasized by a shower of stones and offal from the caverns. They noted certain human relics, well-gnawed and decayed, amid the offal. Ralibar Vooz, animated by wrath against these miscreants, as well as by the fervor of the huntsman, led his six-and-twenty followers in the escalade. He soon reached the chimney's termination, where a slanting ledge offered bare foothold at one side. After the third cast, his rope held; and he went up hand over hand to the precipice.

He found himself on a broad and comparatively level-topped buttress of the lowest cone of Voormithadreth, which still rose for two thousand feet above

him like a steep pyramid. Before him on the buttress, the black lava-stone was gnarled into numberless low ridges and strange masses like the pedestals of gigantic columns. Dry, scanty grasses and withered alpine flowers grew here and there in shallow basins of darkish soil; and a few cedars, levin-struck or stunted, had taken root in the fissured rock. Amid the black ridges, and seemingly close at hand, a thread of pale smoke ascended, serpentining oddly in the still air of noon and reaching an unbelievable height ere it vanished. Ralibar Vooz inferred that the buttress was inhabited by some person nearer to civilized humanity than the Voormis, who were quite ignorant of the use of fire. Surprized by this discovery, he did not wait for his men to join him, but started off at once to investigate the source of the curling smoke-thread.

He had deemed it merely a few steps away, behind the first of those grotesque furrows of lava. But evidently he had been deceived in this: for he climbed ridge after ridge and rounded many broad and curious dolmens and great dolomites which rose inexplicably before him where, an instant previous, he had thought there were only ordinary boulders; and still the pale, sinuous wisp went skyward at the same seeming interval.

Ralibar Vooz, high magistrate and redoubtable hunter, was both puzzled and irritated by this behavior of the smoke. Likewise, the aspect of the rocks around him was disconcertingly and unpleasantly deceitful. He was wasting too much time in an exploration idle and quite foreign to the real business of the day; but it was not his nature to abandon any enterprise, no matter how trivial, without reaching the set goal. Halloing loudly to his men, who must have climbed the cliff by now, he went on toward the elusive smoke.

It seemed to him, once or twice, that he heard the answering shouts of his followers, very faint and indistinct, as if across some mile-wide chasm. Again he called lustily, but this time there was no audible reply. Going a little farther, he began to detect among the rocks beside him a peculiar conversational droning and muttering in which four or five different voices appeared to take part. Seemingly they were much nearer at hand than the smoke, which had now receded like a mirage. One of the voices was clearly that of a Hyperborean; but the others possessed a timbre and accent which Ralibar Vooz, in spite of his varied ethnic knowledge, could not associate with any branch or sub-division of mankind. They affected his ears in a most unpleasant fashion, suggesting by turns the hum of great insects, the murmurs of fire and water, and the rasping of metal.

Ralibar Vooz emitted a hearty and somewhat ireful bellow to announce his coming to whatever persons were convened amid the rocks. His weapons and accouterments clattering loudly, he scrambled over a sharp lava-ridge toward the voices.

TOPPING the ridge, he looked down on a scene that was both mysterious and unexpected. Below him, in a circular hollow, there stood a rude hut of boulders and stone fragments roofed with cedar boughs. In front of this hovel, on a large flat block of obsidian, a fire burned with flames alternately blue, green and white; and from it rose the pale thin spiral of smoke whose situation had illuded him so strangely.

An old man, withered and disreputable-looking, in a robe that appeared no less antique and unsavory than himself, was standing near to the fire. He was

not engaged in any visible culinary operations; and, in view of the torrid sun, it hardly seemed that he required the warmth given by the queer-colored blaze. Aside from this individual, Ralibar Vooz looked in vain for the participants of the muttered conversation he had just overheard. He thought there was an evanescent fluttering of dim, grotesque shadows around the obsidian block; but the shadows faded and vanished in an instant; and, since there were no objects or beings that could have cast them, Ralibar Vooz deemed that he had been victimized by another of those highly disagreeable optic illusions in which that part of the mountain Voormithadreth seemed to abound.

The old man eyed the hunter with a fiery gaze and began to curse him in fluent but somewhat archaic diction as he descended into the hollow. At the same time, a lizard-tailed and sooty-feathered bird, which seemed to belong to some night-flying species of archæopteryx, began to snap its toothed beak and flap its digited wings on the objectionably shapen stela that served it for a perch. This stela, standing on the lee side of the fire and very close to it, had not been perceived by Ralibar Vooz at first glance.

"May the ordure of demons bemire you from heel to crown!" cried the venomous ancient. "O lumbering, bawling idiot! you have ruined a most promising and important evocation. How you came here I can not imagine. I have surrounded this place with twelve circles of illusion, whose effect is multiplied by their myriad intersections; and the chance that any intruder would ever find his way to my abode was mathematically small and insignificant. Ill was that chance which brought you here: for They that you have frightened away will not return until the high stars repeat a certain rare and quickly passing conjunction; and much wisdom is lost to me in the interim."

"How now, varlet!" said Ralibar Vooz, astonished and angered by this greeting, of which he understood little save that his presence was unwelcome to the old man. "Who are you that speak so churlishly to a magistrate of Commoriom and a cousin of King Homquat? I advise you to curb such insolence: for, if so I wish, it lies in my power to serve you even as I serve the Voormis. Though methinks," he added, "your pelt is far too filthy and verminous to merit room amid my trophies of the chase."

"Know that I am the sorcerer Ezdagor," proclaimed the ancient, his voice echoing among the rocks with dreadful sonority. "By choice I have lived remote from cities and men; nor have the Voormis of the mountain troubled me in my magical seclusion. I care not if you are the magistrate of all swinedom or a cousin to the king of dogs. In retribution for the charm you have shattered, the business you have undone by this oafish trespass, I shall put upon you a most dire and calamitous and bitter geas."

"You speak in terms of outmoded superstition," said Ralibar Vooz, who was impressed against his will by the weighty oratorical style in which Ezdagor had delivered these periods.

The old man seemed not to hear him.

"Harken then to your geas, O Ralibar Vooz," he fulminated. "For this is the geas, that you must cast aside all your weapons and go unarmed into the dens of the Voormis; and fighting bare-handed against the Voormis and against their females and their young, you must win to that secret cave in the bowels of Voormithadreth, beyond the dens, wherein abides from eldermost eons the god Tsathoggua. You shall know Tsathoggua by his great girth and his bat-like furriness

and the look of a sleepy black toad which he has eternally. He will rise not from his place, even in the ravening of hunger, but will wait in divine slothfulness for the sacrifice. And, going close to Lord Tsathoggua, you must say to him: 'I am the blood-offering sent by the sorcerer Ezdagor.' Then, if it be his pleasure, Tsathoggua will avail himself of the offering.

"In order that you may not go astray, the bird Raphtontis, who is my familiar, will guide you in your wanderings on the mountain-side and through the caverns." He indicated with a peculiar gesture the night-flying archæopteryx on the foully symbolic stela, and added as if in afterthought: "Raphtontis will remain with you till the accomplishment of the geas and the end of your journey below Voormithadreth. He knows the secrets of the underworld and the lairing-places of the Old Ones. If our Lord Tsathoggua should disdain the blood-offering, or, in his generosity, should send you on to his brethren, Raphtontis will be fully competent to lead the way whithersoever is ordained by the god."

Ralibar Vooz found himself unable to answer this more than outrageous peroration in the style which it manifestly deserved. In fact, he could say nothing at all: for it seemed that a sort of lockjaw had afflicted him. Moreover, to his exceeding terror and bewilderment, this vocal paralysis was accompanied by certain involuntary movements of a most alarming type. With a sense of nightmare compulsion, together with the horror of one who feels that he is going mad, he began to divest himself of the various weapons which he carried. His bladed buckler, his mace, broadsword, hunting-knife, ax and needle-tipped anlace jingled on the ground before the obsidian block.

"I shall permit you to retain your helmet and body-armor," said Ezdagor at this juncture. "Otherwise, I fear that you will not reach Tsathoggua in the state of corporeal intactness proper for a sacrifice. The teeth and nails of the Voormis are sharp, even as their appetites."

MUTTERING certain half-inaudible and doubtful-sounding words, the wizard turned from Ralibar Vooz and began to quench the tri-colored fire with a mixture of dust and blood from a shallow brass basin. Deigning to vouchsafe no farewell or sign of dismissal, he kept his back toward the hunter, but waved his left hand obliquely to the bird Raphtontis. This creature, stretching his murky wings and clacking his saw-like beak, abandoned his perch and hung poised in air with one amber-colored eye malignly fixed on Ralibar Vooz. Then, floating slowly, his long snakish neck reverted and his eye maintaining its vigilance, the bird flew among the lava-ridges toward the pyramidal cone of Voormithadreth; and Ralibar Vooz followed, driven by a compulsion that he could neither understand nor resist.

Evidently the demon fowl knew all the turnings of that maze of delusion with which Ezdagor had environed his abode; for the hunter was led with comparatively little indirection across the enchanted buttress. He heard the far-off shouting of his men as he went; but his own voice was faint and thin as that of a flittermouse when he sought to reply. Soon he found himself at the bottom of a great scarp of the upper mountain, pitted with cavern-mouths. It was a part of Voormithadreth that he had never visited before.

Raphtontis rose toward the lowest cave, and hovered at its entrance while Ralibar Vooz climbed precariously behind him amid a heavy barrage of bones and glass-edged flints and other oddments of less

mentionable nature hurled by the Voormis. These low, brutal savages, fringing the dark mouths of the dens with their repulsive faces and members, greeted the hunter's progress with ferocious howlings and an inexhaustible supply of garbage. However, they did not molest Raphtontis, and it seemed that they were anxious to avoid hitting him with their missiles; though the presence of this hovering, wide-winged fowl interfered noticeably with their aim as Ralibar Vooz began to near the nethermost den.

Owing to this partial protection, the hunter was able to reach the cavern without serious injury. The entrance was rather strait; and Raphtontis flew upon the Voormis with open beak and flapping wings, compelling them to withdraw into the interior while Ralibar Vooz made firm his position on the threshold-ledge. Some, however, threw themselves on their faces to allow the passage of Raphtontis; and, rising when the bird had gone by, they assailed the Commorian as he followed his guide into the fetid gloom. They stood only half erect, and their shaggy heads were about his thighs and hips, snarling and snapping like dogs; and they clawed him with hook-shaped nails that caught and held in the links of his armor.

Weaponless he fought them in obedience to his geas, striking down their hideous faces with his mailed fist in a veritable madness that was not akin to the ardor of a huntsman. He felt their nails and teeth break on the close-woven links as he hurled them loose; but others took their place when he won onward a little into the murky cavern; and their females struck at his legs like darting serpents; and their young beslavered his ankles with mouths wherein the fangs were as yet ungrown.

Before him, for his guidance, he heard the clanking of the wings of Raphtontis, and the harsh cries, half hiss and half caw, that were emitted by this bird at intervals. The darkness stifled him with a thousand stenches; and his feet slipped in blood and filth at every step. But anon he knew that the Voormis had ceased to assail him. The cave sloped downward; and he breathed an air that was edged with sharp, acrid mineral odors.

Groping for a while through sightless night, and descending a steep incline, he came to a sort of underground hall in which neither day nor darkness prevailed. Here the archings of rock were visible by an obscure glow such as hidden moons might yield. Thence, through declivitous grottoes and along perilously skirted gulfs, he was conducted ever downward by Raphtontis into the world beneath the mountain Voormithadreth. Everywhere was that dim, unnatural light whose source he could not ascertain. Wings that were too broad for those of the bat flew vaguely overhead; and at whiles, in the shadowy caverns, he beheld great, fearsome bulks having a likeness to those behemoths and giant reptiles which burdened the Earth in earlier times; but because of the dimness he could not tell if these were living shapes or forms that the stone had taken.

Strong was the compulsion of his geas on Ralibar Vooz; and a numbness had seized his mind; and he felt only a dulled fear and a dazed wonder. It seemed that his will and his thoughts were no longer his own, but were become those of some alien person. He was going down to some obscure but predestined end, by a route that was darksome but foreknown.

AT LAST the bird Raphtontis paused and hovered significantly in a cave distinguished from the others by a most evil potpourri of smells. Ralibar Vooz

deemed at first that the cave was empty. Going forward to join Raphtontis, he stumbled over certain attenuated remnants on the floor, which appeared to be the skin-clad skeletons of men and various animals. Then, following the coal-bright gaze of the demon bird, he discerned in a dark recess the formless bulking of a couchant mass. And the mass stirred a little at his approach, and put forth with infinite slothfulness a huge and toad-shaped head. And the head opened its eyes very slightly, as if half awakened from slumber, so that they were visible as two slits of oozing phosphor in the black, browless face.

Ralibar Vooz perceived an odor of fresh blood amid the many fetors that rose to besiege his nostrils. A horror came upon him therewith; for, looking down, he beheld lying before the shadowy monster the lean husk of a thing that was neither man, beast, nor Voormi. He stood hesitant, fearing to go closer yet powerless to retreat. But, admonished by an angry hissing from the achæopteryx, together with a slashing stroke of its beak between his shoulder-blades, he went forward till he could see the fine dark fur on the dormant body and sleepily porrected head.

With new horror, and a sense of hideous doom, he heard his own voice speaking without volition: "O Lord Tsathoggua, I am the blood-offering sent by the sorcerer Ezdagor."

There was a sluggish inclination of the toad-like head; and the eyes opened a little wider, and light flowed from them in viscous tricklings on the creased underlids. Then Ralibar Vooz seemed to hear a deep, rumbling sound; but he knew not whether it reverberated in the dusky air or in his own mind. And the sound shaped itself, albeit uncouthly, into syllables and words:

"Thanks are due to Ezdagor for this offering. But, since I have fed lately on a well-blooded sacrifice, my hunger is appeased for the present, and I require not the offering. However, it may be that others of the Old Ones are athirst or famished. And, since you came here with a geas upon you, it is not fitting that you should go hence without another. So I place you under this geas, to betake yourself downward through the caverns till you reach, after long descent, that bottomless gulf over which the spider-god Atlach-Nacha weaves his eternal webs. And there, calling to Atlach-Nacha, you must say: 'I am the gift sent by Tsathoggua.'"

So, with Raphtontis leading him, Ralibar Vooz departed from the presence of Tsathoggua by another route than that which had brought him there. The way steepened more and more; and it ran through chambers that were too vast for the searching of sight; and along precipices that fell sheer for an unknown distance to the black, sluggish foam and somnolent murmur of underworld seas.

At last, on the verge of a chasm whose farther shore was lost in darkness, the night-flying bird hung motionless with level wings and down-dropping tail. Ralibar Vooz went close to the verge and saw that great webs were attached to it at intervals, seeming to span the gulf with their multiple crossings and reticulations of gray, rope-thick strands. Apart from these, the chasm was bridgeless. Far out on one of the webs he discerned a darksome form, big as a crouching man but with long spider-like members. Then, like a dreamer who hears some nightmare sound, he heard his own voice crying loudly: "O Atlach-Nacha, I am the gift sent by Tsathoggua."

The dark form ran toward him with incredible swiftness. When it came near

he saw that there was a kind of face on the squat ebon body, low down amid the several-jointed legs. The face peered up with a weird expression of doubt and inquiry; and terror crawled through the veins of the bold huntsman as he met the small, crafty eyes that were circled about with hair.

Thin, shrill, piercing as a sting, there spoke to him the voice of the spider-god Atlach-Nacha: "I am duly grateful for the gift. But, since there is no one else to bridge this chasm, and since eternity is required for the task, I can not spend my time in extracting you from those curious shards of metal. However, it may be that the antehuman sorcerer Haon-Dor, who abides beyond the gulf in his palace of primal enchantments, can somehow find a use for you. The bridge I have just now completed runs to the threshold of his abode; and your weight will serve to test the strength of my weaving. Go then, with this geas upon you, to cross the bridge and present yourself before Haon-Dor, saying: 'Atlach-Nacha has sent me.'"

With these words, the spider-god withdrew his bulk from the web and ran quickly from sight along the chasm-edge, doubtless to begin the construction of a new bridge at some remoter point.

THOUGH the third geas was heavy and compulsive upon him, Ralibar Vooz followed Raphtontis none too willingly over the night-bound depths. The weaving of Atlach-Nacha was strong beneath his feet, giving and swaying only a little; but between the strands, in unfathomable space below, he seemed to descry the dim flitting of dragons with claw-tipped wings; and, like a seething of the darkness, fearful hulks without name appeared to heave and sink from moment to moment.

However, he and his guide came presently to the gulf's opposite shore, where the web of Atlach-Nacha was joined to the lowest step of a mighty stairway. The stairs were guarded by a coiled snake whose mottlings were broad as bucklers and whose middle volumes exceeded in girth the body of a stout warrior. The horny tail of this serpent rattled like a sistrum, and he thrust forth an evil head with fangs that were long as bill-hooks. But, seeing Raphtontis, he drew his coils aside and permitted Ralibar Vooz to ascend the steps.

Thus, in fulfilment of the third geas, the hunter entered the thousand-columned palace of Haon-Dor. Strange and silent were those halls hewn from the gray, fundamental rock of Earth. In them were faceless forms of smoke and mist that went uneasily to and fro, and statues representing monsters with myriad heads. In the vaults above, as if hung aloof in night, lamps burned with inverse flames that were like the combustion of ice and stone. A chill spirit of evil, ancient beyond all conception of man, was abroad in those halls; and horror and fear crept throughout them like invisible serpents, unknotted from sleep.

Threading the mazy chambers with the surety of one accustomed to all their windings, Raphtontis conducted Ralibar Vooz to a high room whose walls described a circle broken only by the one portal, through which he entered. The room was empty of furnishment, save for a five-pillared seat rising so far aloft without stairs or other means of approach, that it seemed only a winged being could ever attain thereto. But on the seat was a figure shrouded with thick, sable darkness, and having over its head and features a caul of grisly shadow.

The bird Raphtontis hovered ominously before the columned chair. And Rali-

bar Vooz, in astonishment, heard a voice saying: "O Haon-Dor, Atlach-Nacha has sent me." And not till the voice had ceased speaking did he know it for his own.

For a long time the silence seemed infrangible. There was no stirring of the high-seated figure. But Ralibar Vooz, peering trepidantly at the walls about him, beheld their former smoothness embossed with a thousand faces, twisted and awry like those of mad devils. The faces were thrust forward on necks that lengthened; and behind the necks malshapen shoulders and bodies emerged inch by inch from the stone, craning toward the huntsman. And beneath his feet the very floor was now cobbled with other faces, turning and tossing restlessly, and opening ever wider their demoniacal mouths and eyes.

At last the shrouded figure spoke; and though the words were of no mortal tongue, it seemed to the listener that he comprehended them darkly:

"My thanks are due to Atlach-Nacha for this sending. If I appear to hesitate, it is only because I am doubtful regarding what disposition I can make of you. My familiars, who crowd the walls and floors of this chamber, would devour you all too readily: but you would serve only as a morsel amid so many. On the whole, I believe that the best thing I can do is to send you on to my allies, the serpent-people. They are scientists of no ordinary attainment; and perhaps you might provide some special ingredient required in their chemistries. Consider, then, that a geas has been put upon you, and take yourself off to the caverns in which the serpent-people reside."

Obeying this injunction, Ralibar Vooz went down through the darkest strata of that primeval underworld, beneath the palace of Haon-Dor. The guidance of Raphtontis never failed him; and he came anon to the spacious caverns in which the serpent-men were busying themselves with a multitude of tasks. They walked lithely and sinuously erect on pre-mammalian members, their pied and hairless bodies bending with great suppleness. There was a loud and constant hissing of formulæ as they went to and fro. Some were smelting the black nether ores; some were blowing molten obsidian into forms of flask and urn; some were measuring chemicals; others were decanting strange liquids and curious colloids. In their intense preoccupation, none of them seemed to notice the arrival of Ralibar Vooz and his guide.

After the hunter had repeated many times a message given him by Haon-Dor, one of the walking reptiles at last perceived his presence. This being eyed him with cold but highly disconcerting curiosity, and then emitted a sonorous hiss that was audible above all the noises of labor and converse. The other serpent-men ceased their toil immediately and began to crowd around Ralibar Vooz. From the tone of their sibilations, it seemed that there was much argument among them. Certain of their number sidled close to the Commorian, touching his face and hands with their chill, scaly digits, and prying beneath his armor. He felt that they were anatomizing him with methodical minuteness. At the same time, he perceived that they paid no attention to Raphtontis, who had perched himself on a large alembic.

After a while, some of the chemists went away and returned quickly, bearing among them two great jars of glass filled with a clear liquid. In one of the jars there floated upright a well-developed and mature male Voormi; in the other, a large and equally perfect specimen of Hyperborean manhood, not without a

sort of general likeness to Ralibar Vooz himself. The bearers of these specimens deposited their burdens beside the hunter and then each of them delivered what was doubtless a learned dissertation on comparative biology.

This series of lectures, unlike many such, was quite brief. At the end the reptilian chemists returned to their various labors, and the jars were removed. One of the scientists then addressed himself to Ralibar Vooz with a fair though somewhat sibilant approximation of human speech:

"It was thoughtful of Haon-Dor to send you here. However, as you have seen, we are already supplied with an exemplar of your species; and, in the past, we have thoroughly dissected others and have learned all that there is to learn regarding this very uncouth and aberrant life-form.

"Also, since our chemistry is devoted almost wholly to the production of powerful toxic agents, we can find no use in our tests and manufactures for the extremely ordinary matters of which your body is composed. They are without pharmaceutic value. Moreover, we have long abandoned the eating of impure natural foods, and now confine ourselves to synthetic types of aliment. There is, as you must realize, no place for you in our economy.

"However, it may be that the Archetypes can somehow dispose of you. At least you will be a novelty to them, since no example of contemporary human evolution has so far descended to their stratum. Therefore we shall put you under that highly urgent and imperative kind of hypnosis which, in the parlance of warlockry, is known as a geas. And, obeying the hypnosis, you will go down to the Cavern of the Archetypes. . . ."

THE region to which the magistrate of Commoriom was now conducted lay at some distance below the ophidian laboratories. The air of the gulfs and grottoes along his way began to increase markedly in warmth, and was moist and steamy as that of some equatorial fen. A primordial luminosity, such as might have dawned before the creation of any sun, seemed to surround and pervade everything.

All about him, in this thick and semi-aqueous light, the hunter discerned the rocks and fauna and vegetable forms of a crassly primitive world. These shapes were dim, uncertain, wavering, and were all composed of loosely organized elements. Even in this bizarre and more than doubtful terrain of the under-Earth, Raphtontis seemed wholly at home, and he flew on amid the sketchy plants and cloudy-looking boulders as if at no loss whatever in orienting himself. But Ralibar Vooz, in spite of the spell that stimulated and compelled him onward, had begun to feel a fatigue by no means unnatural in view of his prolonged and heroic itinerary. Also, he was much troubled by the elasticity of the ground, which sank beneath him at every step like an oversodded marsh, and seemed insubstantial to a quite alarming degree.

To his further disconcertion, he soon found that he had attracted the attention of a huge foggy monster with the rough outlines of a tyrannosaurus. This creature chased him amid the archetypal ferns and club-mosses; and overtaking him after five or six bounds, it proceeded to ingest him with the celerity of any latter-day saurian of the same species. Luckily, the ingestment was not permanent: for the tyrannosaurus' body-plasm, though fairly opaque, was more astral than material; and Ralibar Vooz, protesting stoutly against his confinement in its maw, felt

the dark walls give way before him and tumbled out on the ground.

After its third attempt to devour him, the monster must have decided that he was inedible. It turned and went away with immense leapings in search of comestibles on its own plane of matter. Ralibar Vooz continued his progress through the Cavern of the Archetypes: a progress often delayed by the alimentary designs of crude, misty-stomached allosaurs, pterodactyls, pterandons, stegosaurs, and other carnivora of the prime.

At last, following his experience with a most persistent megalosaur, he beheld before him two entities of vaguely human outline. They were gigantic, with bodies almost globular in form, and they seemed to float rather than walk. Their features, though shadowy to the point of inchoateness, appeared to express aversion and hostility. They drew near to the Commorian, and he became aware that one of them was addressing him. The language used was wholly a matter of primitive vowel-sounds; but a meaning was forcibly, though indistinctly, conveyed:

"We, the originals of mankind, are dismayed by the sight of a copy so coarse and egregiously perverted from the true model. We disown you with sorrow and indignation. Your presence here is an unwarrantable intrusion; and it is obvious that you are not to be assimilated even by our most esurient dinosaurs. Therefore we put you under a geas: depart without delay from the Cavern of the Archetypes, and seek out the slimy gulf in which Abhoth, father and mother of all cosmic uncleanness, eternally carries on Its repugnant fission. We consider that you are fit only for Abhoth, which will perhaps mistake you for one of Its own progeny and devour you in accordance with that custom which It follows."

The weary hunter was led by the untirable Raphtontis to a deep cavern on the same level as that of the Archetypes. Possibly it was a kind of annex to the latter. At any rate, the ground was much firmer there, even though the air was murkier; and Ralibar Vooz might have recovered a little of his customary aplomb, if it had not been for the ungodly and disgusting creatures which he soon began to meet. There were things which he could liken only to monstrous one-legged toads, and immense myriad-tailed worms, and miscreated lizards. They came flopping or crawling through the gloom in a ceaseless procession; and there was no end to the loathsome morphologic variations which they displayed. Unlike the Archetypes, they were formed of all too solid matter, and Ralibar Vooz was both fatigued and nauseated by the constant necessity of kicking them away from his shins. He was somewhat relieved to find, however, that these wretched abortions became steadily smaller as he continued his advance.

The dusk about him thickened with hot, evil steam that left an oozy deposit on his armor and bare face and hands. With every breath he inhaled an odor noisome beyond imagining. He stumbled and slipped on the crawling foulnesses underfoot. Then, in that reeky twilight, he saw the pausing of Raphtontis; and below the demoniac bird he descried a sort of pool with a margin of mud that was marled with obscene offal; and in the pool a grayish, horrid mass that nearly choked it from rim to rim.

Here, it seemed, was the ultimate source of all miscreation and abomination. For the gray mass quobbed and quivered, and swelled perpetually; and from it, in manifold fission, were spawned the anatomies that crept away on every side through the grotto. There were things like bodi-

less legs or arms that flailed in the slime, or heads that rolled, or floundering bellies with fishes' fins; and all manner of things malformed and monstrous, that grew in size as they departed from the neighborhood of Abhoth. And those that swam not swiftly ashore when they fell into the pool from Abhoth, were devoured by mouths that gaped in the parent bulk.

Ralibar Vooz was beyond thought, beyond horror, in his weariness: else he would have known intolerable shame, seeing that he had come to the bourn ordained for him by the Archetypes as most fit and proper. A deadness near to death was upon his faculties; and he heard as if remote and high above him a voice that proclaimed to Abhoth the reason of his coming; and he did not know that the voice was his own.

There was no sound in answer; but out of the lumpy mass there grew a member that stretched and lengthened toward Ralibar Vooz where he stood waiting on the pool's margin. The member divided to a flat, webby hand, soft and slimy, which touched the hunter and went over his person slowly from foot to head. Having done this, it seemed that the thing had served its use: for it dropped quickly away from Abhoth and wriggled into the gloom like a serpent together with the other progeny.

Still waiting, Ralibar Vooz felt in his brain a sensation as of speech heard without words or sound. And the import, rendered in human language, was somewhat as follows:

"I, who am Abhoth, the coeval of the oldest gods, consider that the Archetypes have shown a questionable taste in recommending you to me. After careful inspection, I fail to recognize you as one of my relatives or progeny; though I must admit that I was nearly deceived at first by certain biologic similarities. You are quite alien to my experience; and I do not care to endanger my digestion with untried articles of diet.

"Who you are, or whence you have come, I can not surmise; nor can I thank the Archetypes for troubling the profound and placid fertility of my existence with a problem so vexatious as the one that you offer. Get hence, I adjure you. There is a bleak and drear and dreadful limbo, known as the Outer World, of which I have heard dimly; and I think that it might prove a suitable objective for your journeying. I settle an urgent geas upon you: go seek this Outer World with all possible expedition."

APPARENTLY Raphtontis realized that it was beyond the physical powers of his charge to fulfill the seventh geas without an interim of repose. He led the hunter to one of the numerous exits of the grotto inhabited by Abhoth: an exit giving on regions altogether unknown, opposite to the Cavern of the Archetypes. There, with significant gestures of his wings and beak, the bird indicated a sort of narrow alcove in the rock. The recess was dry and by no means uncomfortable as a sleeping-place. Ralibar Vooz was glad to lay himself down; and a black tide of slumber rolled upon him with the closing of his eyelids. Raphtontis remained on guard before the alcove, discouraging with strokes of his bill the wandering progeny of Abhoth that tried to assail the sleeper.

Since there was neither night nor day in that subterrene world, the term of oblivion enjoyed by Ralibar Vooz was hardly to be measured by the usual method of time-telling. He was aroused by the noise of vigorously flapping wings, and saw beside him the fowl Raphtontis, holding in his beak an unsavory object

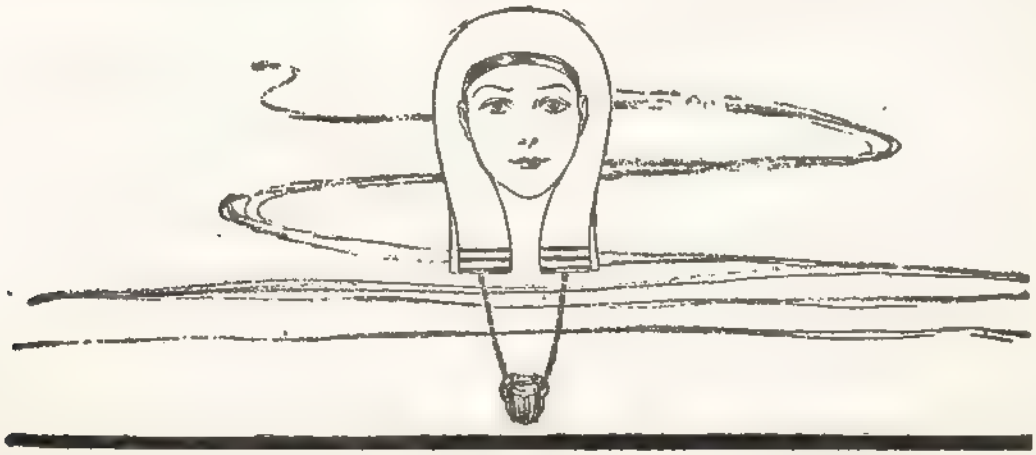
whose anatomy was that of a fish rather than anything else. Where or how he had caught this creature during his constant vigil was a more than dubious matter; but Ralibar Vooz had fasted too long to be squeamish. He accepted and devoured the proffered breakfast without ceremony.

After that, in conformity with the geas laid upon him by Abhoth, he resumed his journey back to the outer Earth. The route chosen by Raphtontis was presumably a short-cut. Anyhow, it was remote from the cloudy cave of the Archetypes, and the laboratories in which the serpent-men pursued their arduous toils and toxicological researches. Also, the enchanted palace of Haon-Dor was omitted from the itinerary. But, after long, tedious climbing through a region of desolate crags and over a sort of underground plateau, the traveller came once more to the verge of that far-stretching, bottomless chasm which was bridged only by the webs of the spider-god Atlach-Nacha.

For some time past he had hurried his pace because of certain of the progeny of Abhoth, who had followed him from the start and had grown steadily bigger after the fashion of their kind, till they were now large as young tigers or bears. However, when he approached the nearest bridge, he saw that a ponderous and sloth-like entity, preceding him, had already begun to cross it. The posteriors of this being were studded with unamiable eyes, and Ralibar Vooz was unsure for a little regarding its exact orientation. Not wishing to tread too closely upon the reverted talons of its heels, he waited till the monster had disappeared in the darkness; and by that time the spawn of Abhoth were hard upon him.

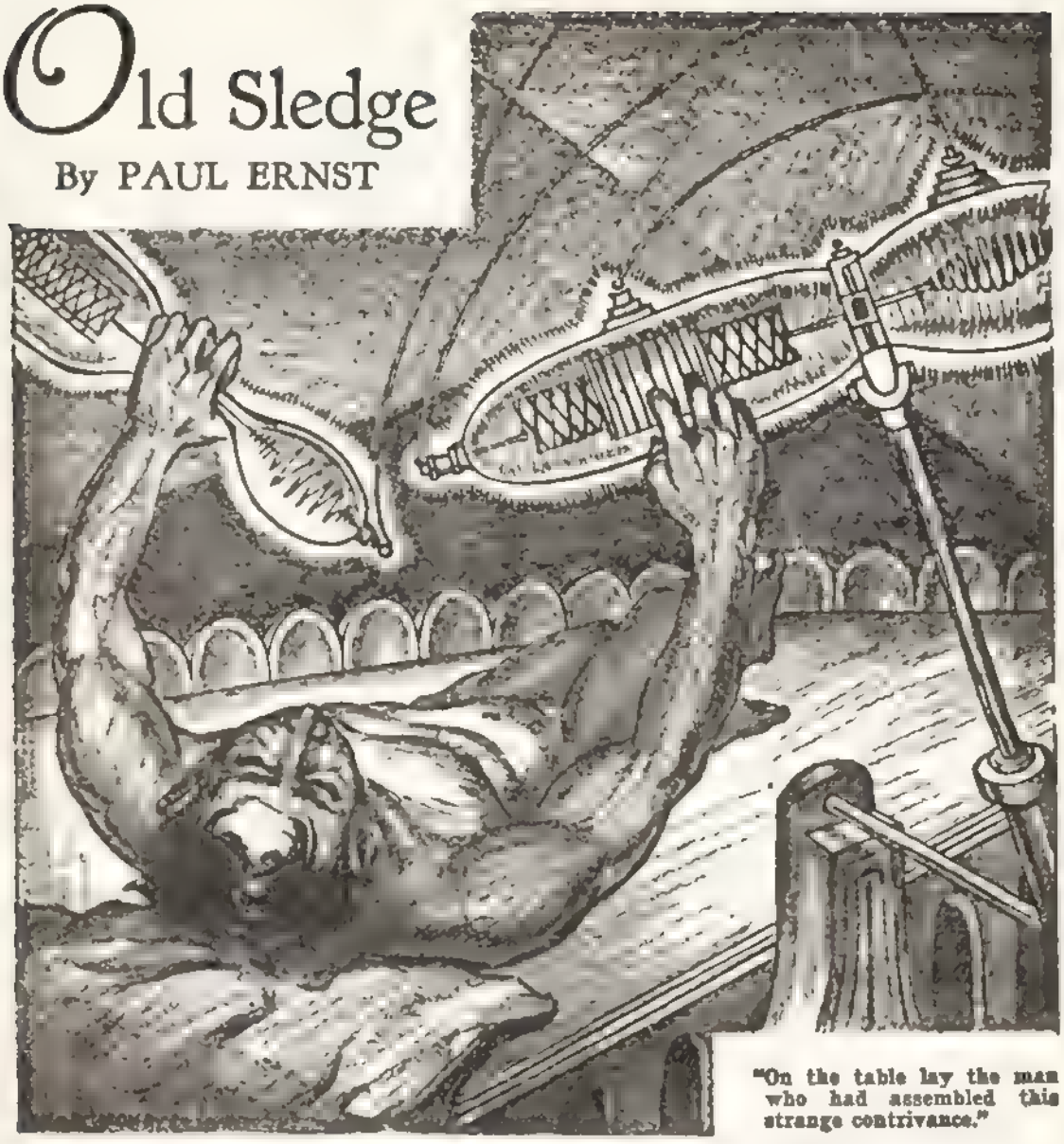
Raphtontis, with sharp admonitory cawings, floated before him above the giant web; and he was impelled to a rash haste by the imminently slavering snouts of the dark abnormalities behind. Owing to such precipitancy, he failed to notice that the web had been weakened and some of its strands torn or stretched by the weight of the sloth-like monster. Coming in view of the chasm's opposite verge, he thought only of reaching it, and redoubled his pace. But at this point the web gave way beneath him. He caught wildly at the broken, dangling strands, but could not arrest his fall. With several pieces of Atlach-Nacha's weaving clutched in his fingers, he was precipitated into that gulf which no one had ever voluntarily tried to plumb.

This, unfortunately, was a contingency that had not been provided against by the terms of the seventh geas.



Old Sledge

By PAUL ERNST



"On the table lay the man who had assembled this strange contrivance."

A strange piece of science-fiction—the story of an eccentric inventor who foretold the future by means of a weird machine

I HAPPENED to be out the afternoon old Sledge moved in. But I was not long in ignorance of his arrival. Mrs. Stong told me about it the moment I came back. In fact, she was waiting in the hall to tell me. She was a bit nervous.

"He's a very old man," she concluded. "He offered a big price and I needed the money, so I rented him the room next to yours. I hope you won't mind."

Mrs. Stong is more like an aunt to me than a landlady. She's a nice elderly woman, a widow, left a house and a tiny income by her husband.

"Mind?" I said. "I'm glad you've got another tenant. Why should I mind?"

"Well, he might be a bother to you," she replied, her mild blue eyes troubled. "I know you like things quiet when you work, and he might not be very quiet."

"But you said he was old."

"Yes, but he's going to work in his room, too, like you, only his work might be a little noisy. He's an inventor, he says."

"An inventor?"

"Yes. He had a lot of boxes and crates moved in. I don't see where he'll put all the things, big as the room is."

An inventor. I was doubtful for a moment. Perhaps he would hammer and drill metals all day.

"He's paying a fine price," said Mrs. Stong apologetically. "He's arranged to pay my electric bill, too. All of it. He says he'll use so much current that my part won't amount to anything."

"Of course it'll be all right," I told her. "His stuff can't be heavy or he couldn't install it on the second floor of a frame house. I don't suppose he'll make much noise. Glad you got the extra income."

I went upstairs then, and forgot the newcomer in a rush of work. I rather expected to see him when I went down to dinner; but he wasn't there. Mrs. Stong explained that he was going to take all his meals in his room. There would continue to be only the two of us at table.

About dawn next morning I woke up. A faint, deep humming noise was coming from the room next to mine. It was that which had wakened me. My new neighbor had evidently got his equipment, whatever it might be, set up and running. I sighed with relief. If that faint hum was all the noise his work produced I'd have no trouble. I went to sleep again, with the hum in my ears, idly wondering what made it.

I DIDN'T lay eyes on the newcomer for six days. And for most of that time I didn't hear him: he worked always at night, and the hum sounded only in the early hours before dawn.

Mrs. Stong continued to be nervous about him.

"There's such a strange, far-off look in his eyes," she said at breakfast of the sixth day. "And it's funny—he won't let me come into his room at all, not even to clean up. He says he'll take care of that himself. When I take up his meals I set the tray in the hall outside his door and then knock and go away. Later I come up for the empty dishes."

"So much less trouble for you," I said carelessly.

"Yes, but—you don't suppose he can be doing anything—anything criminal, do you?"

I laughed.

"He probably has a new perpetual-motion machine and is afraid somebody will see it and steal the idea."

That afternoon I saw him for the first time. We both came out of our rooms together, dressed for the street.

My first glance went past him and into his room. I was curious to see what made the hum. But the maze of unfamiliar equipment I saw told me nothing.

In the center of his room was a long, plain table. Over this were arched many hoops of copper, wired together, I think; I couldn't be sure. At each end of the table was a tall, flat cabinet of metal, painted black, with dozens of wires coming out of insulated apertures and connecting with the copper hoops. Sticking up at either side of the table was a long, narrow glass tube—a vacuum tube, probably—and these two tubes were slanted slightly as though one might lie on the table and manipulate them like gear-shift levers. To carry out that supposition, I got a hasty glimpse of a pillow on the end of the table nearest the tubes, and saw that the pillow was indented as though a head had recently rested there.

Then the door was slammed with such

petulant haste that I glanced at my hitherto unseen neighbor in astonishment.

The man, Sledge, who went to such lengths to keep hidden what seemed so trivial, was a queer-looking old codger. He was small and gnarled-appearing, with deep-set, dreamy black eyes and a wrinkled, clean-shaven face. He was well though soberly dressed and carried, strange to say, an umbrella. As it was the middle of our early summer dry spell and brilliantly sunny out, I reasoned that the umbrella must be a meaningless part of his standard going-out costume. Just another mark of eccentricity.

"Good afternoon," I said, drawing aside to let him precede me to the stairs.

He nodded curtly, carefully locked his door and started down the stairs. We went out the front door together, silently. Old Sledge was certainly no mixer.

On the sidewalk in front of the house I started downtown. Immediately Sledge started the other way, though I had a hunch he was going downtown too—simply wanted to avoid talking to me. You meet hermits like that, even in a city.

But when we had separated a few yards he stopped and called to me. His voice was rusty and reluctant.

"Going to be out all afternoon?" he asked, with what he must have thought was a smile.

I only nodded. Two could play that game of silence.

"Better take an umbrella, then," he said, "or have cab-fare in your pockets. It's going to rain at twenty-nine minutes past four."

I stared at him. There wasn't a wisp of a cloud in sight, and the paper had predicted continued sunny weather. Then I smiled inwardly. Here was evidently one of these old-timers whose rheumatism or bunions make them think they are infallible weather reporters. He was drawing it pretty fine, though. Going to rain at twenty-nine minutes past four! It was a wonder he hadn't called the seconds, too.

"I'll risk it," I told him.

He growled something and went on his way. I went on mine, grinning. Queer, gnarled, crusty old fellow!

I CONCLUDED my business downtown and started, a little after four o'clock, toward the Grace Hotel, where a bunch of us spend a late afternoon once a week over beer and conversation.

As I neared the hotel I saw with mild surprize that it actually was clouding up. The old man's bunions were pretty good, at that. I hurried on my way.

In the window of the Grace Hotel lobby is a big electric clock. I paused under the shelter of the portico to check my watch with the clock, as I always do.

The brisk drumming of the beginning rain sounded on the metal roof of the portico.

It was precisely twenty-nine minutes past four o'clock.

I HAVE never known a man so solitary as old Sledge. No friends came to see him, and as far as I know he went out to see none. He spoke to Mrs. Stong only when he wanted something, and nodded to me only when we chanced to meet in the hall. I probably never would have made his acquaintance, before the end, had it not been for two things.

The first was an ailment of his.

I was going downstairs to dinner one evening when I saw him climbing up. He was coming slowly. His left hand was clutching at his heart so hard that the fabric of his coat was wadded in his fingers. His breath was whistling painfully from his twisted mouth. His eyes were closed.

I ran down and caught his elbow.

"Heart," he whispered. "Bad. Very bad. Not much longer to finish with my work. . . ."

I helped him up the stairs. At his door I tried the knob. The door was locked, as usual.

"Give me your key," I said. "I'll help you in and get some water——"

"No, no!" he panted. "You can't go in. Nobody must go in. I'll be all right."

He leaned on my arm, his seamed old face gradually showing less distress. Finally he took a deep breath and stood alone.

"I'm all right now. Thanks." He drew out his key with trembling fingers and inserted it in the lock. "Thanks."

Plainly he waited for me to go away from there. He was so very worried for fear someone would get a glimpse of whatever it was he guarded so sedulously!

The second thing that undermined his hermitic reserve was the fact that I was a writer and he conceived the notion that he had need of me. The oddest thing!

A few days after old Sledge's heart attack I was laying out my afternoon's work when a knock sounded at my door. I called, "Come in," thinking of course it was Mrs. Stong. But it wasn't. It was my mysterious neighbor.

He stood hesitantly in my doorway, his leathery face wrinkled in the grimace he used for a smile. He was as nervous as an animal about to walk into a trap. I could see it had been years since he had thus sought a person out.

"Come in," I invited, leaning back from my work table. "Have a chair."

He came slowly in and sat down in the chair facing my table. The afternoon sun, slanting in the window, shone on his veined old hands, which rested on his bony knees. The skin of his hands was almost slate-colored, I noticed, as is the skin of many sufferers from heart trouble.

"What can I do for you?" I asked him.

He spoke at last, his voice rusty, grating.

"You are a writer? A commercial writer?"

I nodded, and loaded and lit a pipe, wondering what was in his mind.

"Are you open for more work now?"

"Wide open," I admitted. "Why?"

"I wondered if you would collaborate with me," he replied.

"Collaborate on what?" I asked him.

"A history," he said. "I'm writing a history of the world."

I stared at him in some surprize through the blue wisps rising from my pipe. Where could writing a history of the world fit in with the queer hum coming nightly from his room?

"That's a pretty big job," I remarked. "It would take a long time."

He nodded. "I've worked on it for ten years already."

"Where do you plan to start? At the beginning of creation as theorized by the latest geologists?"

"No, no. I plan to start with the present. You see, I'm not writing a past history of the world. Many have done that already. I'm writing the *future* history of the world."

The room was very quiet for an instant. I stared into his eyes. Save for the far-seeing look Mrs. Stong had commented on, they didn't appear abnormal in any way. But his words . . .

A little chill crept down my spine.

"I'm afraid I couldn't take on so long a job," I said cautiously.

"If it's a question of pay," he replied, "you may name your own figure. I can get money in plenty. In fact, I could be a billionaire if I liked. That is one of the powers given me by my invention."

I LOOKED away from him. I had realized that old Sledge was very eccentric. But this!

Delusions of grandeur! The poor inventor, living in an obscure boarding-house and dreaming he has the key to billions! They have a name for this sort of thing.

"What is this invention of yours?" I asked, clearing my throat.

His lips set like a trap, but after a moment they relaxed.

"If you are to work with me," he admitted, "you should know. But I will only tell you this much. It is a device that enables me to read the future."

"It would have to be very accurate to allow you to write a future history of the world!"

He scowled. "You should know—if you happened to notice what time it started raining the other afternoon."

Again I looked away from him. And again I felt the small chill go through me. I had not forgotten that afternoon. But it had been a guess on his part, of course. A remarkable guess, I would concede; but only a guess.

"My predictions are bound to be accurate," he went on calmly, "because, really, they aren't precisely predictions. They are descriptions of first-hand observations. I can live through any period in the future I choose. Up to five hundred years, that is," he added, seeming to talk to himself more than to me. "To go beyond five hundred years I'd have to use more power. I don't think my heart would stand it."

"So you can read the future," I said. Poor old fellow! But he seemed mild enough to reason with. Anyhow, I thought I'd try it. "But if you could do that you could have a fifty-room palace and an army of servants and the world's finest laboratory to work in."

He nodded coolly.

"I told you I could have billions. But when a man has only to stretch out his hand to take the wealth of a Midas, he finds the acquisition of wealth meaningless. I am quite contented here at Mrs. Stong's, where wholesome food is served me regularly and I'm at peace to explore the future and write about it. As for a laboratory—ordinary house current will run my electrical equipment as far as I dare venture. Now and then I do need money, naturally. When I do, I get a few thousands from the stock market. For example, I'm going to take some money from General Coppers, common, in the next month. General Coppers is now thirty-two. One month from today, on August sixth, General Coppers will close at forty-one and one-eighth. There's a tip for you, young man."

For a moment, so lucid and matter-of-fact were his words, I felt doubts about his unbalance.

It will rain at twenty-nine minutes past four, he had said. And at twenty-nine minutes past four it had rained! General Coppers will close at forty-one and an eighth on August sixth, he said now. Was it possible——?

I told myself not to be a fool.

"What will the weather be like tomorrow?" I asked, almost afraid he could tell me—and be right about it. Two such episodes would make me question my own good sense!

"How should I know?" he snapped. "With the destiny of nations spread before me, do you think I spend my time predicting the weather? I only find out what the weather will be like when I plan to go outdoors. And I only do that because I am old and must take care of my health."

"Sorry," I murmured.

He growled something, testily, and

then said: "Well, will you take the job?"

"I'll think it over," I said soothingly.

He got to his feet and started toward the door.

"I can't see why you should hesitate," he flung over his shoulder. "If you collaborate with me, you will be the only man on earth besides myself who will know the future in store for the world. That is a rare chance to throw away, young man."

But at my door he stopped and came slowly back.

"Here," he growled, taking from his pocket a single sheet of paper. "This is the first page of my history. Read it, see how much needs to be done to make it look right, and tell me in the morning what you decide. If you want to work with me, I'll turn over the first chapter then."

HE NODDED curtly and was gone, leaving me to stare at the scrawled writing on the sheet of paper.

A Future History of the World
by Amos W. Sledge

Thus, bluntly, it opened. And it went on with equal bluntness:

Japan declared war on Russia on April 12th, 1935, at eight-thirty a. m. Japanese troops, concentrated along the Manchurian border, moved promptly into Siberia. English private interests were threatened. England and Italy joined forces with Russia. Germany came to the aid of Japan, while France debated whether to fight against Germany, her ancient enemy, or line up with Germany and Japan in the hope of winning the Italian Riviera and Tripoli as booty in case of Japanese victory. At three in the afternoon of April 15th, racial hatred of Germany won and France declared war against Japan. . . .

Such was the bald beginning of Sledge's *Future History of the World*. There was nothing very remarkable in it. Many men have predicted war between Japan and Russia, with world war to follow—though none, as far as I knew, had set the exact hour for war's declaration. It took a harmless crank like Sledge to do that.

Still, he had said it would rain at twenty-nine minutes past four. . . .

But again I told myself not to be a fool. Some people are affected by coming changes of weather. Sledge happened to be one of them. Feeling rain "in his bones", he had set the probable time when it would start—and had happened to hit it. That was all. Indeed, he might not have hit it, at that. It might have begun earlier and I had not seen the first drops. It might have started earlier or later in other parts of the city, and happened to begin at the predicted moment only in the section where I was. No, the whole thing was crazy, of course. As crazy as old Sledge must be.

Still, it was amusing to speculate on the power that would belong to a man who really could read the future.

Truly the wealth of the world would be his. He could break the bank at Monte Carlo permanently. He could pick every winner of every horse race (something that made me sigh wistfully). He could take countless millions from the stock market. He could be a king, an emperor, lord of the earth. . . .

But one thing such a man certainly would not choose to be. That was an obscure boarder living in genteel poverty in Mrs. Stong's frame house!

I grinned, and turned back to my own work, with the sample first page of Sledge's ridiculous *History* tucked in my table drawer. At the same time I heard the now familiar hum begin from the freak mechanism in Sledge's room. Was he lying on the long table now, under the arching copper hoops, with his hands grasping the long vacuum tubes that looked like bulbous gear-shift levers? Was the old fanatic reckless enough to let electricity course through his feeble

body in some complicated form, and was it the current which formed in his mind hallucinations of events to come?

It was the first time I had heard him work in the daytime; but it didn't bother me any. I put him out of my mind and began to peck at my typewriter keys, getting in some good hours before Mrs. Stong called me to dinner.

It was shortly before midnight when I went to bed. I thought the hum of Sledge's bizarre mechanism sounded louder than usual. But it was an idle thought, and with the thinking I fell asleep. . . .

I WOKE in hell.

Pain, such pain as I had never dreamed could be borne, swelled within me; swelled, and exploded with each beat of my heart, to flood through every atom of my body.

I tried to open my eyes and could not. The small muscles motivating my eyelids seemed to be paralyzed. I could only lie still, racked with agony.

Where was I? What had happened to make me like this? A century seemed to have passed since I had fallen asleep—a century filled with experiences that would be for ever beyond reach of memory.

A rustle of fabric sounded beside me, and a loud rattle, as if someone in a stiff dress had moved and had laid down a newspaper. Then came footsteps and a voice. A man's voice.

"Is he still the same?"

A woman's voice: "The same. The effects of the last hypodermic have not worn off yet."

"So I see."

"Has he a chance?"

The man—the doctor—answered: "No. He can't live more than a few hours. It's a marvel he's lived this long—I've never seen a man so badly burned."

"I know," the woman murmured. "What a terrible accident! I've been reading more about it in the late edition. The most horrible part, perhaps, is that it should have happened the day before Christmas. All those people, planning their holiday, happy, with no idea of what the future held——"

"Which was a boon," the man's voice cut in. "Better to be struck down without warning than to know your fate in advance and die a hundred times in anticipation. Mankind's greatest blessing is that it can't read the future."

There was a pause; then the woman's voice came pityingly: "This unfortunate will be out of his torment soon, anyhow. Have his relatives been notified?"

"Apparently the only family he has is an uncle in Boston. A Mr. John Pendleton. I telegraphed him and he is on his way, but he can't get here in time."

I tried to speak. This was *I* they were talking about. *I!* An unfortunate soon to be out of his torment? Only a few hours more to live? I tried to shout that it was a lie. What in heaven's name had happened?

There was a shuffle of footsteps.

"Give the poor devil another injection in a few minutes," the man said. "He'll need it."

Brisk footfalls died away. I heard the paper rattle again, as if once more it had been picked up.

With an enormous effort I opened my eyes. I could only see out of one of them.

I saw white enameled bars a few feet away—the foot of a hospital bed, I guessed. I saw a body swathed in mummy wrappings of white, stained through here and there with some oily salve. I saw a hand and arm so bandaged as to look like the limb of a crudely sculptured snow-man. *My* body! *My* hand and arm!

What had happened to me?

I glanced sideways out of my one good eye. I saw a woman in a nurse's uniform sitting in a straight-backed chair reading a newspaper. Her lips were pursed and her eyes were moist.

Her elbow rested on a small night-table, which was barely within my range of vision beside my bed. A small lamp on the night-table shone on an array of bottles and a big jar of some yellowish ointment. There was a watch, too, an old-fashioned one with a hunting-case. The watch lay on its back with its front snapped open. I couldn't see the face of it, but I could see the back of the opened lid. It was elaborately designed in different-colored gold. There was a hunting-dog in red gold standing with one front paw raised in a spray of green gold grass. The background was plain yellow gold. I'd never seen the watch before; it meant nothing to me.

Intolerable thirst tortured me.

"Water," I tried to say. But I couldn't make my lips move.

Hospital bed, night-table, nurse, everything swam in a mist of pain and thirst.

The light shone squarely on the back page of the newspaper, which was hardly a foot from my face. It shone on the date line, particularly. December 24, the date line said. December 24, 1935.

This was delirium, I thought weakly. I had fallen asleep on the night of July sixth, 1934. But the pain in me, which had increased with each labored thud of my heart, crowded out such unimportant things as date lines.

"Water," I tried again to say. "Water."

Only a faint moan came from my lips, and I saw the nurse move swiftly. My sight was so hazed over by now that all I could distinguish was a moving blur of white. Then I felt a slight sting, and sank into a coma. . . .

A SPLINTERING crash sent me flying out of bed before I was half awake. I was on my feet almost before my door, broken from its hinges, hit the floor.

Stupefied, I gazed down at myself. Where had the swathing bandages gone? And the awful pain? For I was dressed in ordinary pajamas, and was perfectly well, as I had been when I went to bed in Mrs. Stong's house.

But now I saw that once more I was in her house. In my room. Not in a hospital cell on a white iron bed. And the hall was filled with voices, and a man in a fireman's hat and oilskins was stepping over my wrecked door toward me.

"We thought you were dead," he said hurriedly. "Come on—snap into your clothes. I think we've got the fire under control, but you can't always tell."

I coughed then, and realized that the room was full of smoke.

"What happened?" I yelled at the man, who, having finally waked me from my trance-like sleep, was already leaving.

"The old guy in the next room set the house on fire," he called over his shoulder. "Short circuit in some crazy electrical junk of his."

He hurried out. I could hear the swish of some fire-extinguishing fluid as I threw on some clothes.

The blaze was out when I got to old Sledge's room. The blaze was out, but it was a marvel the whole house hadn't gone up in smoke.

The place was completely gutted. Sledge's bed was nothing but charred boards and a bare spring. The legs of his desk had burned through and the desk-top had crashed to the floor to scatter a great heap of burned writing-paper. Rugs, drapes, everything inflammable, were gone.

My gaze jerked to the center of the room where Sledge's curious apparatus

had been set up. There wasn't much of it left intact.

The two tall, flat cabinets which had been at each end of the table lay on the floor, battered and crushed by the feet of the firemen. The copper hoops that had arched over the table now sagged every which way. The two long, slender vacuum tubes were broken, and the delicate, close-packed grids and filaments which the glass had housed were hopelessly fused together.

And on the table, as on a bier, lay the man who had assembled this strange contrivance. Old Sledge, his body charred and stark, a sacrifice to his monomania. The man who foolishly claimed he could read the future.

I went to the charred desk and stooped over the heap of ashes that had once been a foot-thick bundle of manuscript. One corner of one sheet remained.

"Chapter Nine, *Future Hist*——"

That was all.

No, it was not quite all! The wall between this room and mine was more damaged than any other wall, indicating that the short circuit had started the fire within a few feet of where my bed was placed. . . .

I HAVE done very little work since that night. I have done little of anything —but think.

What happened in old Sledge's room before the fire? Did his heart fail as soon as he started the current coursing through his body on leaving me that afternoon? Did that current then slowly build up so that, by the time I retired, it was intense enough to reach my bed and give me, too, the power to live for a short while in the future? Was my fragmentary interlude of torture on a hospital bed a true glimpse into my future?

Impossible! Nonsense!

Sledge was mildly insane. His "invention" was a meaningless tangle of wires. My experience of seeming to lie dying of burns from some inexplicable accident was only a dream, a nightmare brought on by the smoke in my room and the crackling of fire near me. It must be that. It *must* be!

Because, if it isn't, I have been given my death sentence: that I shall die in agony before next year is out.

But such thoughts are absurd. Assume old Sledge's mechanism could place one into the future. Assume the mechanism, without its master's control, could radiate enough of its mysterious power to drag me into the time-to-come. Is it logical to suppose that, of the many other hours that might have been revealed to me, my death-bed hour should chance to be hit upon? No! . . .

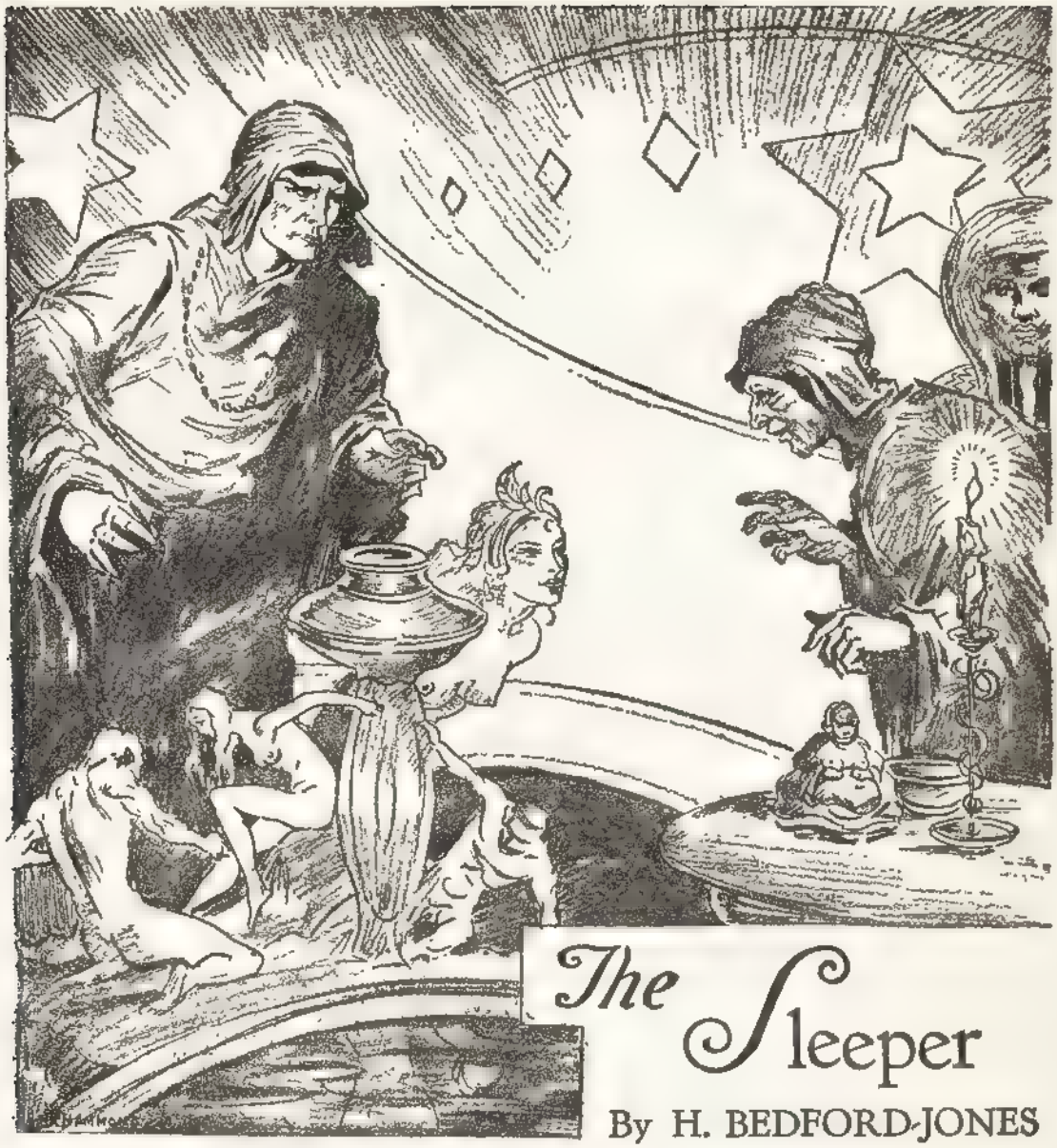
Ten days ago I got a letter from my Uncle John in Boston. "While going through an old dispatch box," he wrote, "I came upon this watch of your father's. I don't think you ever saw it—he died when you were so small—but I send it to you in the same mail, under separate cover, as a keepsake."

The watch is an old-fashioned gold one with a hunting-case. On the front of it is a hunting-dog, in red gold, standing with lifted forepaw in a spray of green-gold grass.

I must have seen the watch when I was a child, and have forgotten it till subconscious memory resurrected it in my odd dream. For it was all a dream, of course. I repeat that. I'm not going to die horribly on the day before Christmas of this year. I'm not! The whole thing is a fantasy born in the sick brain of a man who fancied he was a supreme inventor. Old Sledge was mad, I tell you! Mad! . . .

Today is August sixth. General Coppers closed at forty-one and one-eighth.

"He initiated me into all his secrets."



The Sleeper

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

Ranjit Singh, the East Indian necromancer and stage magician, was dead and buried, so they said—but what was that thing in the mummy-case?

I MET Ranjit Singh several times, back in the early days when his "sleeping" act was becoming famous. In fact, as an ardent newspaper man, I studied the act with the idea of exposing it, until Ranjit convinced me. A great guy, this Ranjit Singh!

Yes, he was good. I had not thought about him for a long time, not for years, until the sight of that mummy somehow reminded me of him. Why Jim Bledsoe would want an Egyptian mummy in his apartment, I still fail to see, but there is no accounting for tastes. Bledsoe was older than when I knew him in the old days. That scrawny, cavernous face of his showed his age terribly and always did give me the shivers. When I ran into him

on the street, however, he was so heartily glad to see me that I went home with him. However, I regretted it. I dreamed about his deep black eyes, his long slithery fingers, and that silent, ghastly laugh of his. They haunt me now, as I write.

Possibly you remember Ranjit Singh? He started out as a small-time magician, and worked up to doing his "sleeping" act before crowned heads, a good many years ago. He was no more Hindoo than I am, but I could never get him to admit his real birth. He was swarthy, but not black, and handsome as a Greek statue.

That man had something on the ball. He was no faker, because I convinced myself, and I was skeptic enough. Ranjit was supposed to go into a trance, and he did go into a trance—but not where the women were concerned! He could wind any woman on earth around his little finger. They fell for him right and left, and pulled him into some bad scrapes, because he did not have sense enough to leave married women alone.

Many and many a time I watched his act close at hand, watched him like a hawk. Back in those early days before he took up with Jim Bledsoe, his manager and helper was an old chap called Ali—a real Hindoo, scrawny, with a wispy white beard and no lost motion, who could squat on his heels by the hour. I have heard that Ranjit Singh got all he knew from this same Ali.

Despite all our science, catalepsy and self-hypnotism are still closed subjects to us, and mysterious enough. The fact that Ranjit Singh was buried alive for days at a time seemed preposterous to me; I meant to expose him and even told him so. He only laughed and offered me every facility—and made his offer good! There was a devilish charm about the fellow. He had a personality that no one could resist.

BEFORE describing my meeting with Bledsoe, the other day, let me tell just how Ranjit Singh did his act, and why he convinced me. In preparation, he would fast for several days. Then, the audience assembled, Ali would lead him out and Ranjit would lie on a couch in full sight, fold his hands over his breast, and go to sleep.

It was not really sleep; it was catalepsy.

Ali, with two assistants from the audience, would pull a linen bag over Ranjit's entire figure and tie the draw-strings above his head. They would lift him into an ordinary padded coffin, without air-holes, screw down the lid, and lower the coffin into the prepared grave—usually a dozen feet down. The earth would be thrown in.

No illusion, mind! No trickery of any kind. I have watched that grave day and night. I have paid men to watch it, and paid other men to watch the watchers. When the coffin was exhumed, after days or even weeks, I have been one of the assistants. Always the same scene, always the same result. I even had doctors who certified to it.

Always Ranjit's brain was warm, the rest of the body cold and shriveled. Ali would bathe him with hot water and olive oil, and massage his limbs. Gradually they would relax. There was no pulsation in the heart or the wrist, but it would slowly come. His mouth, when opened, showed the tongue curved back. Ali would rub the eyelids with oil, an electric heater being applied to the top of Ranjit's head. Gradually respiration came back; sometimes the man was violently convulsed. The glazed eyes would take on life. When Ranjit Singh finally rose and spoke a word or two, the show was over.

Yes, Ranjit had something, and no mistake!

I heard, in course of time, that old Ali had died, and that Ranjit had taken up with Jim Bledsoe, who was a born showman despite his queerness. Bledsoe took Ranjit abroad and made a great hit; then I never heard any more from them. What with the war and various other things, I forgot them both over a period of years.

Then, the other night, I ran into Bledsoe on the street. There was no mistaking his cadaverous, black-clad figure, though his hair and mustache were now gray. He called my name, and wrung my hand heartily. His grip was cold, clammy, sent a shiver through me.

"You must come up to my place and have a drink and a chat!" he exclaimed. "I'm delighted, delighted! Come along; we'll go over old times. I'm all alone."

"Alone?" I repeated, fearing to ask after his wife. One is always afraid to ask, when years have intervened. Besides, Jim Bledsoe had been utterly devoted to his wife. "You don't mean——"

He hooked his arm in mine. I drew away from his touch; I would have backed out then and there, but for his reply.

"Yes, my dear fellow; I'm alone," he said. His voice was indescribably mournful. "I see your meaning. She was lost to me, lost to the world, years ago. Do come! It'll do me good to talk with you. I've been horribly lonely of late."

DESPITE the sensation of revulsion that he inspired, I felt instantly sorry for him. I was alone, too, and knew what it meant. Talking the sorrow out to an old friend is the only help left in the world. So I complied. Not that he was melancholy—not in the least!

It was only a short walk to his apartment, which was luxurious in the extreme; clearly enough, Bledsoe was under no financial difficulties.

He ushered me into a huge living-room; it was the sort of place one might expect such a man to have. At one side, standing on a slant, was a magnificently painted mummy-case. All about the room were queer objects—Pharaonic carvings in wood and stone, Chinese masks, African gods in black wood, a brass pentacle, used in divination, and so forth. Bledsoe drew up a tantalus, opened a humidor, and threw himself into an easy-chair.

As we talked, gradually breaking through the crust of the years, my eyes dwelt frequently on an oil painting near by. It showed a nude woman; a small painting, but so exquisitely done, so lovely in every detail, that it reached the heart. Bledsoe caught my glances, I was aware, but he made no comment.

"Last I heard of you," I said at length, "you were handling that cataleptic chap, Ranjit Singh. Whatever became of him? I tried hard to expose him once, but failed."

Bledsoe's black eyes glittered with a spark of flame, and he laughed in his silent manner, which sent a chill up my spine.

"Not you alone, my friend! Yes, many tried to expose him, but there was nothing to expose. Real! Ranjit Singh was real, no fake! His trance was real. He was a great money-maker, too. Our success really was the foundation of my fortune."

He laughed again, without a sound. His sallow, cadaverous face lit up, and those long, smooth fingers of his played with his Corona.

"Poor Ranjit!" he said, and shrugged. "You know, we were great friends. He initiated me into all his secrets—and I can swear to you, as one friend to another, that his act had not one particle of illusion or trickery about it! He was simply pos-

sessed of the God-given gift, that was all. In Egypt, as the result of investigation by some French savants, he remained buried for five weeks—five weeks, do you understand?"

He gave me a shrewd, excited look, as his voice rose.

"It seems incredible," I rejoined, and he laughed silently at this.

"So they said; but we proved it to them!"

"What became of him?" I queried.

He puffed at his cigar for a moment. Through the blue haze, I saw his eyes darting at me, probing me, like red jewels in a grotesque mask. I noted how white and perfect his teeth were, despite his age.

"Poor Ranjit!" he said, and a sigh escaped him. I sensed a certain cunning in his glance, and wondered if he were trying to conceal something. "He broke down at last—the strain got on his nerves, I imagine. We had made plenty of money, too. Yes, he went to pieces. He determined one night to return to India—this was after we had come back to Egypt. He knew his nerve was gone, and quit. You know how it is with such people."

I nodded. This was quite true. There comes the sudden snap—and it is over.

"He didn't go on with his magic, then?"

Bledsoe made a gesture of contempt. "Magic! Illusion and trickery, all of it. No, he did not need to return to that. He caught the next boat through the canal, and a few months later I heard he had died in Bombay. But this was while I—while we were in Paris, where I was having troubles of my own."

"Queer that he should go to India!" I commented.

Bledsoe gave me a sharp, flaming look. "He was a Hindoo, you know! He had come from there as a boy."

RANJIT was nothing of the sort, as I well knew, but I did not intend to get into any argument with Bledsoe about it. I had the feeling that if he got too excited, he would go smash. To change the subject, I looked up at the picture on the wall.

"An extraordinary thing you have there!" I exclaimed. "It has an odd fascination, Bledsoe. The coloring, the workmanship, is exquisite; the figure has a delicacy, a touch of fairy beauty, that's remarkable. By gad, there's something haunting about that face!"

"There ought to be," he said. "Felicien Hans did it for me."

His face had darkened. His voice was curt, ugly, vibrant with deep and sinister emotions. But his words left me really astonished.

Felicien Hans, of all people—the genius who died in a madhouse! I never knew that Hans did or could do such pictures as this. He was famous for his pictures of the ghastly, the macabre, the horrible; in all he did was a certain awful blasphemy against God and man and nature. Much of his work could not be published, so unspeakably lewd was it. And to think that he had done this delicate, lovely canvas!

"No wonder there's genius in it," I commented.

Bledsoe looked up at me, and I surprized in his face so deep and terrible a look, that its unutterable tragedy gave me a positive shock.

"My friend, that is her portrait," he said in a low voice. "Hers! We had to come to it, I know; I do not think you ever knew her!"

Embarrassed, I shook my head.

"No. And I didn't mean to touch on any unhappy subject, Bledsoe——"

"Oh, be at ease, my friend! It relieves my soul; to speak of her, to tell you the truth, is to share my own load!" he said with earnest animation. A flame lit his face; a flame that alarmed me, frightened me.

"It is no long story," he went on, laying aside his cigar. "You see, we were both quite fond of Ranjit Singh. Poor Anna was subject to frightful headaches, and Ranjit could banish them with the touch of his hand. They were like two happy children!"

I started slightly—was it possible? Had Ranjit Singh, who could never refrain from any woman who took his fancy, come between this couple? Then, as Bledsoe went on, I saw my mistake.

"When Ranjit left us so suddenly," he pursued, "Anna was quite well for a time. We went to Paris. Then she broke down; she became subject to hallucinations. Yes, my friend, I must tell you the worst," he went on gravely, solemnly. "Her mind failed. Nothing could help her. She begged for Ranjit, but by this time we had news of his death. She came to think that he was with us still. She fancied that he was in the same house with us, in the same room!"

As he spoke, I was conscious of a frightful sensation. Some telepathic quality leaped from his mind to my own, inspiring me with acute horror. I realized that my fingers were trembling, my heart was pounding.

"That is all," and Bledsoe, perhaps perceiving my agitation, leaned back suddenly in his chair. "Nothing could be done for her, my friend. She is still alive, still there in Paris, well cared for—hopeless! And I have never had happiness since then, although a certain satisfaction comes to me at times——"

He broke off abruptly and sat in an attitude of dejection. But I caught a glimmer from his black eyes, knew he was directing keen, crafty glances at me. With an effort, I struggled to break loose from the singular sensations he had evoked in me, and putting down the cigar, I lifted a drink to my lips. The liquor warmed me instantly.

"I'm sorry, Bledsoe," was all I could say. "I had no idea of such a tragedy in your life——"

"Oh, the worst of it lies in the past," he exclaimed, in a lighter voice, and awoke from his dejection. "I am glad we have touched upon it; I feel much better. The old loneliness, the ache, is relieved! By the way, here is something that might interest you to see. Perhaps you'll recognize it."

He went to a table and opened a drawer. I wanted to get away, to get out of this place, but could not decently go at once. The cunning in Bledsoe's eyes, the gleams of crafty mental agility, gave me the idea that he, too, might be a little mad.

Coming back, he handed me a ring, set with a lapis lazuli scarab.

"Ranjit gave me this when we parted," he said. "Do you remember it?"

Did I, indeed! Far better than he knew. Ranjit Singh always wore it. On one occasion he had mentioned to me that this ring would never leave him, that it had never left his finger and would be buried with him. Ranjit had some deep belief in it as a charm, I imagine. And he had given it to Bledsoe? Well, perhaps. . . .

"Yes," I said, returning it. "I recall he invariably wore it. Well, old man, I must run along—it's later than I realized!"

"And I'm not very cheerful company,

eh?" Bledsoe laughed silently, and slipped the ring on his finger. "But before going, come and look at my mummy. It's rather remarkable, they tell me, because so well preserved. The face is exposed, and has never changed from the time I unwrapped it. I got it, of course, before the present rigid restrictions on the removal of antiquities from Egypt."

He crossed to the gorgeous mummy-case, and I followed him, more anxious than ever to get away. That noiseless, ghastly laugh of his, his tragic story, was on my nerves.

Taking hold of the heavy lid, Bledsoe lifted it away and stood it against the wall. Beneath was a heavy plate-glass lid which he had fitted to the case; as he explained, it kept out the air and lessened the chance of the mummy falling to dust, as so many of them did upon exposure.

There, wrapped in the innumerable wrappings of the dead, was the mummy, intact. I was astonished by the sight of the exposed face; it did not have the dried, skin-and-bone appearance of most mummies. Still, it was shriveled enough. The singular thing was that the hair, mustache and beard were intact.

"A bearded mummy!" I exclaimed. "Why, Bledsoe, I never heard of such a thing!"

He was enjoying my amazement.

"It is probably unique," he observed. "Perhaps it is not an Egyptian at all—who knows? Some day I must have the inscriptions translated."

I turned away. Something in that face wakened a chord in my memory; odd as it seemed, it made me think of Ranjit Singh as I had frequently seen him before he was wakened from the cataleptic trance. I flung another glance at the mummy.

"Queer!" I murmured. "This chap has rather the look of Ranjit, somehow—or is it my imagination?"

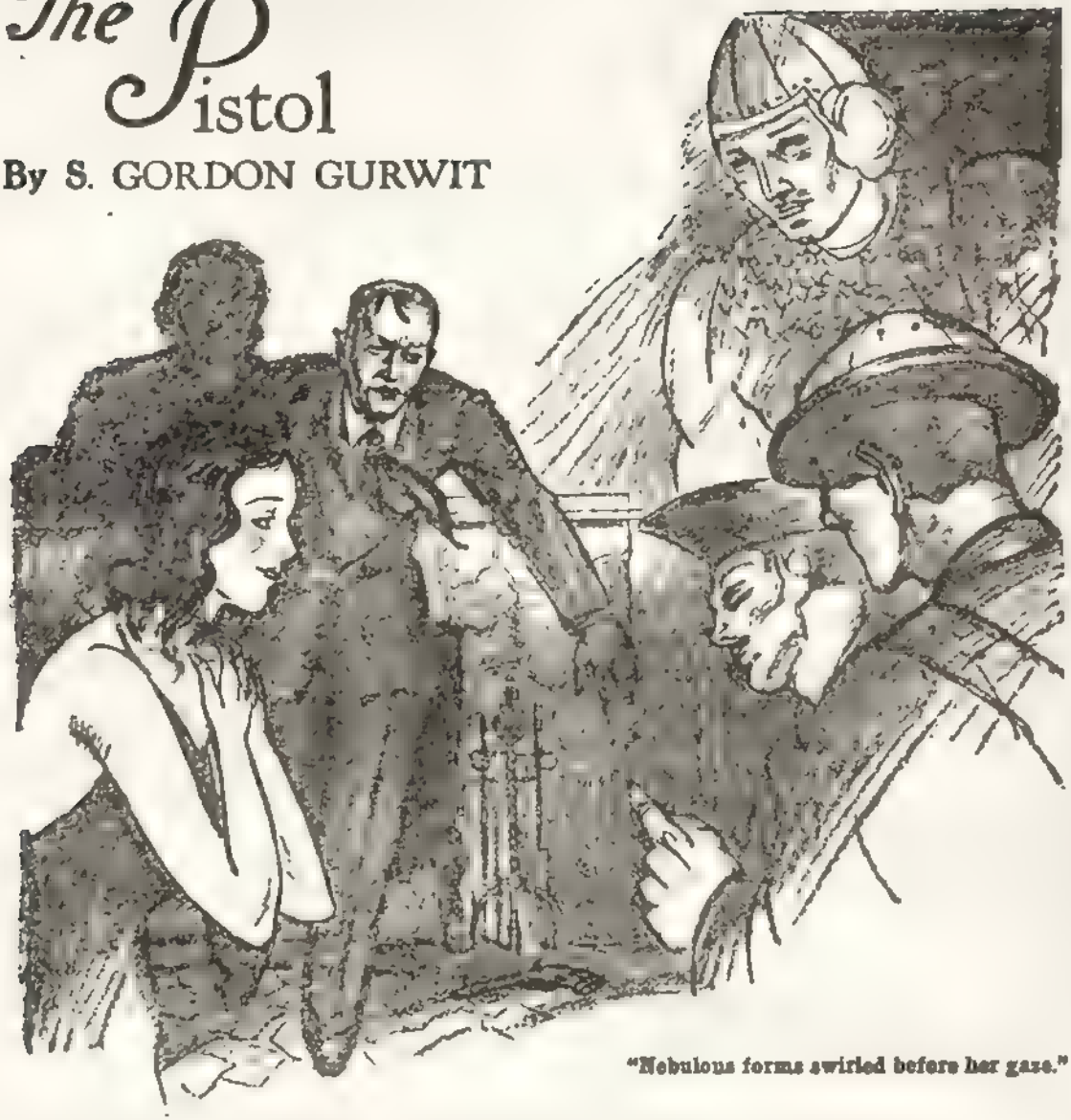
"No, no," Bledsoe said, and chuckled. "Do you know, I have fancied the same thing myself, at times? Well, old man, I wish you wouldn't go——"

Go I did, however, and drew a breath of sane relief when I emerged alone into the night air. That cackling chuckle of Bledsoe's still rang in my ears. And I dreamed of him, of his noiseless, hideous laugh, and in my dream saw his long hands, with the lapis scarab on the smooth finger. . . .

I have had enough of meeting old friends.

The Pistol

By S. GORDON GURWIT



"Nebulous forms swirled before her gaze."

An appealing story of a love so strong that it was able to break through the barriers of Death

IT WAS a beautiful, sinister thing, with its blue, engraved Troxado Damascus steel barrel, its ivory stocks and gold inlay. And it was small, as ancient pistols go.

And there was a curious legend about it: that it killed whenever the life or honor of a Drummond was in peril; and sometimes the circumstances had been very perplexing—according to the stories.

Originally, it was a flintlock, and the first Drummond to own it had bought it from Manton, the London gunsmith, in 1759, and had used it as a saddle-bag arm.

It followed the Drummond fortunes to the Western Hemisphere in 1763; and when the great Elizabethan home was built in Colfax, Georgia, in 1799, it hung between the crossed swords over the fireplace. It had played its part in the Revolutionary War as a side-arm for a Drummond who served the Colonies under Washington.

Just before the Civil War, Vane Drummond had it remodeled to shoot the then popular pin-fire cartridges; and when he joined Lee's staff, he carried it in his belt. In 1864, the pistol was again hung on the wall and remained undisturbed until the fall of 1932. As I have said, it was a beautiful, sinister thing.

And it played a cogent part in this drama of a great love that transcended death; a love as imperishable as the storied attachment of an Abelard and a Heloise; as deathless as the passion of a Tasso and a Leonora; as divine as the flame that burned in Dante for a Beatrice.

2

DIANE DRUMMOND loved the stately Elizabethan home her father had left her in heritage; loved its great halls, its stained windows, the huge rafters; the old, haunting fragrance of lavender and dried rose leaves that clung to the rooms where Drummond girls and brides and wives had lived. She loved the old trees, older than the house itself, that shaded it; the sunny lawns, the old-fashioned rose gardens with the tiny fountain and sundial.

Here, generation after generation of Drummonds had lived; here, the blessings of the dead had rested and the memory of perfect faiths and lofty passions still abided.

And Diane Drummond was a fit occupant of the stately home. There was something vital, something sovereign about the beauty of this young girl, who moved with the grace of a Semiramis, and had the innocence and fawn-like shyness of a girl in her early spring.

An only child, she had been brought up by a father who had been a student, and who had left behind him a library full of every provocation to literary gourmandism. The girl, led by habit and inclination, became an omnivorous reader.

She lost herself in the words of dead and forgotten poets, in the immeasurable majesties of thought. Isolated as she was in her home, the pure mirror of her soul had never been darkened by the breath of passing love fancies—and a girl can far more readily lose herself in the abstract loves of books than a youth, beset by the fires of impending manhood.

After her father's death, she lived alone, with an old negress as housekeeper. Her heritage was sufficient to let her live in comfort in her backwater of the world.

It is true that Frank Dean, who lived in another ancient home in Colfax, had loved her for years; but the secret of sex was still a closed book to her. She admired him, and listened, fascinated, as he talked to her of a thousand things, with a rich and graphic eloquence.

He was a brilliant geologist and was fast making his way in his profession. She knew and loved the kingdom of his thoughts, the treasuries of his mind. And Frank Dean was a comely young giant; yet she had never visioned him as a husband.

Frank Dean, who was seven years older than she, worshipped her, for he found in her a finer metal, a purer fiber than is usually associated with such youth and beauty.

Then Fate, with her fondness for mischief, tangled the threads of their lives. Frank Dean was offered an opportunity to join an important scientific expedition that was leaving for the headwaters of the Amazon. It meant fame, success, distinction. He accepted.

It also meant a year or more in a wild and savage country, and Dean knew that he couldn't take a wife with him.

He discussed his offer with her, and she recognized how important it was for

him to go. And it was then, in the dusk of the Southern evening, that she suddenly realized what he meant to her. He took her in his arms and poured out his heart, with all the fire of his temper, with every imploring eagerness, every impassioned pleading that could warm or shake the heart of the girl.

The warm springs of her affections gushed forth in answer, and they agreed that they would be married when he returned.

A month went by. For them, a month of Paradise; a lover's month in a magnolia-scented wonderland; an idyl of dewy mornings, amber noons and velvet, gem-studded nights; a poet's dream of Arcadia.

Her serious young eyes, worshipping him, would darken when she asked the eternal feminine question:

"Frank—will you always love me?"

"Toujours!" he would say. "Always, while I live—and for all eternity!"

Then, one night, he left to join the expedition which was leaving from New York. At that time, Diane was twenty.

She sat the next evening and thought of Frank Dean, and the prescience came to her that she had always loved him; that she would always love him, and with a depth of tenderness as profound and inexhaustible as the deep seas. She sat, mute, her eyes lustrous with the weight of new-born thoughts.

Letters came from Frank Dean as long as the expedition was in touch with civilization; then the letters grew far between as the party advanced into the wilderness, and, at length, stopped. Frank Dean sank as utterly from human ken as if he was dead. And finally, several months later, she read in the newspapers that the entire expedition—with the exception of one porter—had been wiped out by savages. The porter told a story of a night attack, a brave defense and a ruthless slaughter. Frank Dean was mentioned as one who had died.

The shock stunned her. She became seriously ill, and it was several months before she ventured forth again in the open, under the eyes of a professional nurse.

Then, the little income that she had always taken for granted as perfectly secure, wavered in the readjustments of a difficult economic period, and she was informed that it had been substantially decreased. It meant that she would have to do something to supplement it in order to live. Unhesitatingly—because her own nurse had interested her—she decided that she, too, would become a nurse.

Physically, she recovered fully, only to suffer all the tortures which wring the inmost soul of a woman who loves and knows that all the charms and senses of her lover are for ever beyond her touch or sight or prayer.

But in her heart, Frank Dean lived. Death, to her, was a cruel wall built up between them, forbidding them the touch of each other's hands, denying them the smile of each other's eyes; but none the less to her was he near, unseen, hidden behind that inexorable, invisible barrier which one day would fall and let her pass to join him.

It was during this period of her convalescence that she first became aware of a strange, disquieting phenomenon: there were times, especially when she was alone, when she intuitively *sensed* that there was some unseen presence in the room with her.

However, she saw nothing. Imagination—call it what you will—discerned a rustling silence; some unsuspected sixth sense detected an incorporeal presence. Strangely, she was not frightened.

As time went on, the manifestations be-

came stronger. One night, while she sat in that state of lulled, listless meditation between waking and sleeping, induced by fatigue, she fancied she saw Frank Dean standing in one corner of the room—a luminous, wavering figure, who regarded her with grave eyes, in which there was a love so tense, so illimitable, that it brought a catch in her breath. And she saw a puckered, jagged wound in his neck.

"Frank!" she cried out, startled—and the specter vanished instantly.

Gradually, the conviction grew upon her that death was but a barrier—that Frank Dean was struggling to cross it.

Seated in the little church on Sundays, with the grand diapason of the organ rolling its rich music upward, and during the hush of prayer, it seemed to her that she heard another and more divine chorus take up a chant that whispered high up through the arches—beautiful, terrible in its majesty, awful in its measured serenity, appalling, yet god-like in its calm; while through the hush that followed swept a whispered name—her own—coming from some limitless immensity; and, like a sob, one unearthly, ethereal *Kyrie Eleison.*

Did she fancy it—or was Frank Dean standing there watching her? Was she the only one who saw him? she wondered. And a perfect peace filled her. She felt—she *knew*—that he was near—so near that her heart drummed to the proximity. And a great content settled upon her spirits. She knew! Call it self-hypnosis, if you will, induced by a woman's fathomless love. You might be right—and you might be wrong.

After that, he materialized often. She would look up with a start and see him standing there, and she would smile through her tears; but after her probationary period of training was over and she went north to take up her work in earnest, the phenomenon ceased entirely. Some subtle contact had snapped.

She was more than ordinarily gentle with the sufferers who came under her domain in the New York hospital where she found employment; and it was here that she met Jack Baily. He lay, in his brown, brigand-like handsomeness, near a large window, his eyes glazed with a film, gasping his life away.

3

DIANE DRUMMOND recoiled at first mentally, physically and spiritually from the sickening scenes, the odors, the nauseating nakedness of the hospital. Her experience as a nurse had revealed passions and sins, though all evil was written in a dead tongue for her. The world hardly credits or comprehends that the awakening of the intelligence and the sleep of the senses can be long co-existent. They can in women. Shakespeare knew this truth. Goethe did not. She was not ignorant of evil, but innocent of it.

Jack Baily's case was assigned to her. She was told that he was beyond medical help.

She glanced at the chart, noted the glaze in his eyes, and, in involuntary compassion, smoothed the tumbled hair away from the wide, feverish forehead.

He shook his head with a slight impatience, and turned, for the first time, to look at her. The vision of loveliness that met his eyes had power to send a flicker into them, even though the dews of a mortal agony were thick upon his forehead.

"Is—is it the end, nurse?" he whispered.

"I hope not," she replied, in her intensely musical voice.

She eased his position, adjusted his pillow and smiled at him. She was to

stay until the end. His case was hopeless. The chart told the ominous story and the doctor had told her that any minute might be the last.

"Don't—don't go, nurse," he whispered, his lack-luster eyes riveted to hers. "Please stay—till it's over——"

She smiled through a sudden mist of tears, although death was an old story to her now.

"I'll stay," she promised, and seated herself near the bed.

A darker flush than the fire of his fever crossed his cheeks, and the bold, hard eyes looked at her gratefully.

Jack Baily was the unique product of the New York underworld, a graduate from the ranks of the lesser Free Lances into the realms of big game. First conscious of life as a gutter foundling of the slums, he became a poolroom habitué; later, a bouncer, and he began to read, for he was ambitious; a race-track tout; an opium-seller in Chatham Square; then to the point, by slow stages, where he commanded an underworld gang. A gang leader. A "big shot." A bullet wound in the lungs had induced the pneumonia that now ravaged him.

He was as foul and rank a growth as a great slum can produce, and not fit to be in the same room with the little nurse; but death is the greatest of all socialists.

"It's—the end, isn't it?" he asked.

She could not lie in answer, so she turned her head away.

"Thanks," he whispered. "I'd rather know, nurse. I don't think I'm afraid." His feverish eyes searched the room as if to seek an answer to the one question that humanity has never solved. Deity was but a phrase to him; faith and a future life were but empty syllables. To him the end was the "end" of all things. It meant cruel corruption, hideous putridity, blank nothingness, eternal silence. A keen remorse and humility urged his better instincts now, in the face of certain death.

"So this is—the end?" he repeated. "Well, if that's so, life's not worth the effort! I never thought it would be like this." His fever mounted and he clutched her hand like a child lost in the dark.

"Do you want me to send for any one?"

He shook his head negatively, while a convulsive agony twisted his body.

"No!" he gasped. "There isn't—anybody. You—stay——"

"I will. Wouldn't you like to talk to Father Von Geyso?"

"A priest? Is—it—that near? No, I don't want him—you stay."

She sat immovable, touched to the heart. Occasionally, she held a cooling drink to his fevered lips. He dozed intermittently, waking each time with a start, and smiling slightly when he saw her still in the room.

Night came, and the physician stopped in, glanced over the chart and shook his head at her questioning regard.

"He'll go before morning," he whispered to her.

"Is there no hope?"

"None!"

She dismissed the idea of dinner. She couldn't eat anything. As the evening wore on, the fever rushed over him strongly. In a tense delirium he muttered vague, unintelligible snatches and uttered vivid, prurient oaths that caused the girl to cover her face with her hands.

NEAR midnight, he grew calmer and the fever subsided. He opened rational eyes and looked at her.

"Nurse," he whispered, "I hate to go like this. I've been a pretty bad egg all my life. I've got money, nurse—a lot of money. I'd like it to do some good—after I'm gone——"

She nodded, mute.

His eyes devoured her with a thirsty admiration and a shrewd worldliness.

"You're the kind that can be trusted, nurse," he continued. "I've got—an idea. Will you marry me right away—before——"

Bewildered amazement entered her eyes. She put it all down to the fever and patted his hand. He couldn't know what he was saying.

"It's—it's—only for an hour or two," he whispered, rapidly. "Please—be a sport—it can't hurt you—I'll be—out—before morning. It'll give you control of my money—and you'll be able to do some good with it. It's only for an hour or so, nurse. That bunch of money will fall into crooked hands if you don't. I'd like you to have it—to do some good with it——"

"Please—be quiet!" she said, gently. She knew the futility and hopelessness of reasoning against the delusions of a sick bed.

"No!" He was vehement. "You think it's fever—it's not! I want you to have it. I'd like you to carry my name when you do good things with it—if only for a little while. Take the money and do something for poor kids with it—in my name—and take the name, too, nurse—it's only for a few hours—will you?"

She was startled out of her professional calm and a great pity welled up in her breast.

The doctor looked in again and shook his head after a brief examination.

"No use," he said, low. "He'll go soon. No hope. He can't last till morning. I think I'll wake Father Van and send him in."

She inclined her head and went back to the bedside.

"You see?" whispered Baily. "I heard him! Will you, nurse? It's only for an hour or two—and you'll do some good with the money—I can trust you—but I can't trust any one else. It'll all get into dirty hands if I die without——"

A violent fit of coughing choked his utterance for a moment; it became a hemorrhage, and she held him up and helped him, gave him water and changed his blanket. He lay quiet now, his chest rising and falling spasmodically, his breath wheezing, and a gray pallor crept over his face.

The priest came in and sat down by the bedside. The sick man correctly interpreted the import of his presence.

"Nurse," he pleaded; "it's almost—over—will you—please?"

Her face grew troubled with a great vexation. She struggled with the complex intricacies of a woman's impulses and motives. Naturally repelled by the suggestion, a great compassion flooded her heart at the same time.

His eyes sought her own with a timid yet feverish supplication. He knew his own unworthiness; he saw himself, for the first time, as he was—yet, life was slipping. He felt like one who slides down a mountain crevasse and has just time and consciousness enough to see the treacherous ice go by him, the black, impenetrable abyss yawning below, the cold, dark death awaiting him beyond, while on the heights the sun is shining. To him, love had always been a thing of the senses. This nurse had given him a glimpse of a different affection. Vague, dreamy, half-soft, half-stormy thoughts swept over him, despite his nearness to the zero hour.

The priest was puzzled. He inquired of the nurse what it was the man begged for; but it was Baily who explained.

"The money will get into crooked hands unless I leave it to her—unless it's legally hers—tied tight! She could do a lot of good with it—and I trust her—it's

only for an hour—it's only a matter of form so it'll be legal for her to have it. If she wants to marry any one—you can tell him all about this—no man would object if he understood—please—please!"

The priest frowned, while the girl, sorely troubled, involuntarily recoiled. Marriage, to her, was a sacred thing, not a vehicle of convenience; still, what harm could it do to assuage the terrors of a dying man and fulfill his requests—laudable, charitable requests?

"It is really a trust," said Father Von Geyso, finally. "It can not harm you, surely, and your wifehood would be confined to a name and a charitable duty. Unless there is one near to you who would object——"

She glanced at the hard, fever-brightened eyes of the dying man.

"Let me think a moment," she replied, and walked from the room.

In the silent corridor, she passed up and down, torn between compassion for the dying man and her own instinctive revulsion against the act.

"Frank!" she whispered, standing in a dark corner. "Help me, Frank—tell me!" But there was no answer. Silence, vast, dim, lay upon the midnight corridor.

The doctor came through the hallway, adjusting his coat. She stopped him.

"Baily," she said. "Are you sure?"

He smiled slightly and wondered at her agitation; still, young and good-looking patients sometimes pierced a nurse's professional calm.

"Not a chance in a million," he replied. "His lungs will fill before morning. Sorry. I'm going home. Doctor Lenz will see you through. Good-night!"

For several seconds she stood looking blankly at space. She had seen death closely and often. She comprehended the fears, the bitterness of this man who was alone in the valley of shadows, with darkness closing in, with no ray of light to guide, no gleam of hope to aid. He clung to the world he knew, praying a tie to leave behind.

In her clean, unselfish heart there was the power of sacrifice of a Viriathus or an Arminus. Still, what of Frank Dean, whom she loved with every fiber of her being, and who, she believed, had crossed the unknown frontiers and whose love for her had transcended death? How could she now, even as a matter of form, take the name of wife from any man? Would Frank understand? And yet, to let Baily's life flicker out and his intended charity be frustrated by a—scruple! Surely, it couldn't harm her or her love for Frank Dean in any way. Baily was a stranger, of course, and she knew something of his history, but he asked nothing of her but to give his wealth to the needy. It was a kingly, generous impulse. And, by morning, he would be—dead.

She entered the room and walked to the bedside. Both the priest and Baily eyed her. Tears stood on the silk of her lashes.

"I will do it," she said.

The priest summoned two witnesses, another nurse and Doctor Lenz, both on night duty; and in the hush of the death room, he married them, using a seal ring that Baily wore.

When the ceremony was over, and the names had been signed to the acknowledgment of marriage, Baily lay back with a long sigh, his eyes brilliant.

"Now," he whispered, "I'll sign that will you wrote, Father, and all of you please sign as witnesses. Doctor, you can testify as to my sanity. Now—let them send on the fireworks! I don't care—I'm ready—when they are!"

He kept his eyes fixed upon the nurse, but gradually they closed and his face grew pale. Doctor Lenz bent over him.

"Coma," he pronounced, turning. "Probably never come out of it."

All through the night Diane and the priest sat by the bedside. Baily was sleeping at dawn, his forehead cool and moist.

Doctor Lenz looked in, examined him, took his temperature and straightened out with an astonished snort.

"Why," he began, "why, he's—why—he'll live! This is a miracle! I must call the staff!"

Diane's eyes silvered. She was genuinely glad; then her face blanched terribly. It was her husband who lay there—who would live!

4

BAILY'S convalescence was rapid and a matter of marvel to the entire staff. Diane nursed him throughout with a complex mixture of feelings: a sudden loathing for this stranger whose name she bore repelled her with a morbid potency, which, in turn, gave birth to a vague fascination.

He urged no claim, except that his eyes pleaded incessantly. He once tried to hold her hand. He never received another opportunity.

Winter settled upon the northland and the snow came. Coincidental with Baily's recovery, Diane's term at the hospital expired and she determined to return home for a rest. What she had seen of New York, and what passed muster there as "life," did not appeal to her. She classed it all as a brilliant, perpetual carnival and a permanent yawn.

She was fatigued and needed a rest. The thought of going back again to live in quiet, sleepy Colfax stole over her senses like a healing narcotic. Her inherited income had improved slightly, and as it grew, Colfax became the Elysium of her desires.

The day before she planned to go, she came to Baily's room, dressed for the street.

He sat by the window, and his eyes, as he surveyed her, burned darkly. She had been lovely in her white uniform; now she was bewildering.

"I am leaving for home," she told him, calmly. "Of course, I shall have the marriage annulled. I am glad that you have recovered, and that there is now no need for a—beneficiary. You can now, in person, perform any charitable acts you desire."

"You—can have the money, if you want it," he answered. A strange, novel embarrassment was upon him. "I—wish you might—give me a chance before you—annul the marriage."

A flush of anger heated the delicacy of her face.

"Surely, you understand why I consented to the ceremony at all?" she said. "Why—you are a stranger to me!"

He was rarely to be daunted; still less rarely to be shamed; yet he was both now. He strove to overcome the feeling.

"Well, I care about you," he said. "Why can't we try to go on? I'd do everything in the world to make you happy—I'd give you everything that money could buy. Won't you consider?"

"It's out of the question," she answered, coldly. "It's—unthinkable!"

"Wait—listen to me first!" he pleaded.

She heard him without interruption.

"I'm sorry," she answered, at length, "if you feel like that, but what you suggest is utterly impossible. Frankly, I'd rather die!" Her calm contempt cut him like a knife.

In his desperation, he lost all his keen and subtle tact, the fine inscrutable ability that had never failed him. The old, barbaric leaven of jealousy broke out despite all intelligence that should have crushed it into silence.

"I suppose there's some one else," he growled. "If there is—remember that you're my wife——"

"What right have you to question me?" Her glance swept him with a biting contempt. "I shall have the marriage annulled and I don't ever want to see you again!" She walked out of the room.

For a few moments he really suffered; for a few moments his ironic philosophy was dead—a corpse that lay cold and powerless before him, incapable of rallying to his rescue; a thing of clay without a shadow's value; but he was too much the underworld gangster to be long under the dominion of a woman.

He suddenly cursed her with a terrible bitterness and a hatred as great as his baffled passions; for love and hate are passions that lie close together. Now convinced that he was out of the shadows and would live, he reverted to type.

"She's my wife," he muttered, a savage glitter in his shrewd, worldly eyes. "We'll see about this annullment business!"

5

DIANE took up again the pleasant, even thread of her life at home with a sense of keenest pleasure. There were black threads in the golden rosary of her joyance, however. The great, silent grief was Frank Dean's death; the other was her marriage to Baily.

She took immediate steps to have it annulled, but was informed that the legal red tape would take some time. She urged haste, for, with Baily living, it seemed a desecration upon the memory of her sacred dead.

The wells of her affection had closed with Frank's death. For her there was no compensation, no consolation. In her heart, he would live for ever.

Then, a week after her return to Colfax, she again became conscious, at times, of a curious feeling that she was not alone. Was this hallucination, she wondered, some dream that haunted her and which she could not sever from reality? But some subconscious sense whispered "Frank!"

"Can it be," she questioned of herself, "that those who have gone on across the border of death have ways of communicating with the living?"

What lay across the mortal frontiers? —beyond the sunlight, the noise, the color, of life? Another existence? Sentience? Knowledge? Voiceless, brainless, mute wandering in an illimitable, Stygian void?

In the brooding, fragrant hush of the Southern night, it seemed to her that Frank stood near, regarding her with fathomless eyes. Did she fancy it, or did she actually see the ghostly lips form the word *"Toujours!"*—the little word that had meant so much between them; the little French word he had been so fond of saying to her, and which meant "Always!"

Always!

The word was in her own heart, graven deeply. A chastened solemnity, having no affinity with the fevered dreams, the sensuous sweetness of mortal desires, wrapped her about. Always. Through eternity. In the moth-haunted dusk she saw the luminous eyes of Frank Dean, grave, sweet, bringing her a quiet ecstasy.

THEN, one late afternoon, she sat dreaming by the window of her library. The sun was near his setting, and all the earth was brilliant with the imperial glories that attend the gorgeous burial of a Southern, sunny day. She heard the door open, heard Mandy speak to some one, and Jack Baily walked into the room.

Diane's heart stopped for the moment and her face grew colorless.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Why—I came to see you," he answered.

Contempt swept her face. "I don't care to see you," she answered, with a chilly tranquillity. "I believe I made myself clear. You have no claim upon me or my friendship."

His glance, licentious and ruthless under the velvet gentleness of his long-studied regard, devoured her loveliness with a thirsty admiration. A tiger-glitter began to dance darkly in the veiled eyes.

"I asked you not to be too hasty and consider——"

"There is nothing to consider!" she interrupted, a fiery scorn on her lips.

A breathless, pregnant silence fell in the room. Her nearness flooded Baily with a blind insanity, so that he forgot his danger—and he was in danger.

Upon leaving the hospital, he had returned to his haunts. A rival had been shot dead. It was in reprisal for his own wound. He had escaped from New York by a very narrow margin. Apprehended, it meant death or prison.

He had meant to get into Mexico, but a tangent of memory began to catalog the charms of the girl who was his wife in the eyes of the law, and he diverted his flight to Colfax.

Now, his danger slipped from his mind and his sudden passion was controlled only with difficulty beneath his suave, mellow demeanor, which by long usage had become to him as second nature.

"You're my wife before the law," he said. "I have every right to be here—and I'm going to stay awhile, too!"

She gave him a look of repugnance.

"Since you see fit to transgress all the laws of courtesy and decency," she answered, "you will allow me to transgress those of hospitality and show you the door!"

She walked past him into the hall, but he followed close, attempting to take her arm. To avoid his touch, she slipped into the drawing-room and switched on all the lights in passing. He followed directly after her.

An insane light came into his face as a faint perfume met his nostrils when she swept past him. He paused before her with the nerves of his cheeks quivering.

"Will you go?" she asked; "or will you force me to call help and put you out?"

"You won't put me out!" he whispered. "You're my wife! I have a right to be here!" A cunning flicker contracted his blazing eyes. "You haven't told any of these home folks that you're married," he went on. "I know! I asked when I got into town. You don't want it known. Well, if you insist, I'll have to tell your little secret, and so help me, I'll add and invent enough of certain things that will make you miserable as long as you live—unless you behave!"

The girl's face blanched, but her bearing did not alter.

"Get out!" she ordered, tensely.

"What would you say," he went on, "if I took off my hat and coat and made myself comfortable on the veranda—make myself at home—as I have every right to do?"

Sheer rage made her unable to reply.

"Better behave," he went on. "If you don't, I'll fight that annullment suit, too—unless—well, *unless!* Now, let's behave like grown-ups—and talk about our plans. You might try—bribing me!"

The blood suddenly flashed back into her colorless face and she shrank from him as from a dread pollution.

He stepped forward suddenly, reckless of consequences, but she avoided him with a rapid movement. Then she sprang to the fireplace and took the ancient pistol down, but before she could pull back the old-fashioned hammer, he had wrenched it from her hands and taken her in his arms.

She struggled like a fury, like a little, velvet leopard, and her waist tore under his efforts to reach her lips, exposing one snowy shoulder.

Then, as she cried out in pain, the sound of heavy feet came from the veranda and two men stood in the doorway.

One look was enough for Jack Baily. There is no instinct so rapid and so unerring as the instinct of a foe, and there was no mistaking the character and the object of the two men. It meant that detectives had managed to track him.

Baily snatched up the ancient pistol from the table, pointed it and pulled the trigger. A metallic "click" answered him. With an oath, he cocked it again, but threw it down on the table and snatched at his own weapon.

But Diane's attention was frozen now upon a tremulous disturbance near the fireplace. Nebulous forms swirled to her terror-stricken gaze and froze her throat into dry constriction. Then—her heart leaped with one mad throb — and stopped. Frank Dean stood there, ghastly pale, with the puckered wound in his throat, and his eyes sought hers gravely. He stepped to the table, his hand reaching out for the cocked, ancient pistol.

Jack Baily's hand had stopped and he, too, seemed to see the ghostly apparition. An insane scream came from his throat.

Frank Dean's hand touched the pistol and a thunderous report sounded suddenly. Baily dropped to the floor and lay immovable.

The two detectives, weapons now drawn, stared at the dead man in bewilderment. They did not see what Diane saw, and were puzzled; but her eyes followed the figure of Frank Dean.

She saw him step back to the fireplace —and beheld a strange company who stood there, spectral, every one of them, for she easily discerned the bricks of the fireplace back of them; yet some species of sentient life and animation shone in their grave eyes.

Her father stood there with Frank Dean, and others stood there, too, silently watching the sprawled figure of Baily; men in strange uniforms and the quaint fashions of bygone years; a tall wraith in buckskin seemed to be carrying a long rifle—a ghostly company, summoned across the unknown and answering the call of one of their own blood when danger threatened.

The smoke fumes of the black-powder discharge of the old pistol swirled indistinguishably with the faint nebula of the vision, and faded slowly, leaving nothing to her sight but the old, stone fireplace.

She collapsed softly, on her lips the murmured name of the man whose spectral touch had fired the old pistol as it lay upon the table.

WHEN she regained consciousness, she was on the couch, with Mandy murmuring over her, and the two detectives watching.

The taller of the two men held the ancient pistol and was looking at it curiously.

"Sorry this had to happen here, M'am," he said. "Baily was wanted in New York for murder. We found out about his marriage and had a hunch he'd come here." He fingered the pistol. "Lucky," he went on, "the cartridge was so old it missed fire the first time—or I guess I'd have got mine! She shoots a big

bullet! It's funny, too, that there's no empty shell in it. I guess it was so old it crumbled and fell apart at the discharge. Curious how it went off all by itself on the table—and was pointing right at Baily!"

She did not answer. Evidently, they had not seen what she had seen.

"Guess the trigger was worn so much," offered the other detective, "it let the hammer slip down. Well, we'll take him away now, M'am. Sorry. I don't think you need worry any more—if what we saw happenin' in here was how you felt about him. We should have pumped a slug into him when we saw him grabbin' you, but we wanted him alive. Bad actor! But that old pistol beat him to the draw!"

LATER, the girl sat by the window in the monastic half-light of the old room, illumined only by a great, theatrical Southern moon. Mandy had hung the pistol in its place under the crossed swords. A vast peace held the girl mute. Across the garden she stared with eyes that saw nothing but the loved features of the man whose guardianship had transcended death.

"Toujours!" she murmured, to herself.

Mandy came to give her a wrap and lingered, intrigued, excited. She knew something of the curious history of the pistol, and she sniffed.

"Funny 'bout that ol' gun, Miz Diane," she said. "It's kinda like a haunt, I say!"

Diane Drummond nodded. "It's uncanny, Mandy! You saw it wouldn't shoot —well, the first time; but it shot—when it should have! Mandy—I know—*positively*—that it hasn't been loaded since the Civil War!"

As I said in the beginning—it was a beautiful, sinister thing.

The Hill Woman

By FRANCES ELLIOTT

The valley people wondered at her choice,
  The old house groping up the straggling hill,
With mold'ring walls that echoed back her voice
  And vistas that were always blank and still
As ancient dreams; they never really knew
  The hill flowers had such laughing Pixy eyes,
Hill clouds with silver pitchers poured the dew
  As dawn fans quivered in the orchid skies.

She hugged the secret of her wishing well,
  A whispering madness when the luring Junes
Tossed ragged roses in a drowsy spell
  That burgeoned to the bee's bass-violed tunes.
The valley people marvelled as their spires
  Caught up the splendor of her altar fires.

"Every muscle held ready for instant action, he rounded the last boulder."

The Trail of the Cloven Hoof

By ARLTON EADIE

A startling weird mystery story, of strange deaths on the desolate Moor of Exham, and the mysterious creature known as "The Terror of the Moor"

The Story Thus Far

WHAT is the real meaning of the mysterious Thing—horned, cloven-footed, yet speaking with a human voice—which haunts the desolate recesses of Exmoor? The baffling problem confronts Hugh Trenchard in a dramatic guise when he stumbles on Silas Marle lying stunned and helpless in the mist-drenched night, and the subsequent disappearance of his body from within Moor Lodge only serves to deepen the mystery.

What part does the young and beauti-

ful Joan Endean play in this weird tangle? Appearing like a wraith out of the storm-tortured night, she disappears after entrusting Hugh with a sealed packet which, after it has been stolen from him, she confesses to have contained only blank papers.

With the aid of a former fellow-student, Ronnie Brewster, Hugh avows his determination to solve the riddle of the Terror of the Moor—a resolution that is strengthened when he learns that Silas Marle has bequeathed his entire fortune to him on that very condition.

Accompanied by Ronnie, he motors to the lonely house on the Moor which was Marle's home, and there finds a letter addressed to himself, by which he learns that the murdered scientist had discovered a method whereby the nitrogen of the atmosphere, combined with the natural elements contained in every living body, might be utilized as a means of wholesale slaughter. The secret of the manner by which this may be effected is contained in a sealed envelope, which the letter begs Hugh to guard as a sacred trust.

Detective-Inspector Renshaw, of the C. I. D., arrives on the scene, and in his presence Hugh resumes the reading of Marle's letter. He had (the letter states) taken into his employment a half-witted lad named Crazy Jake, who, having discovered the formula of the human detonator, was about to betray it to Professor Felger, a suspected secret agent in the pay of a foreign power. As the only means by which the secret may be preserved, Marle uses his discovery on Jake as he makes his way across the Moor.

Having satisfied himself that Jake has received injuries from which no human being could recover, Marle thinks he has effected his purpose. Some six months later, however, he is horrified to see the face of his victim gazing at him through the library window.

16

HUGH TRENCHARD paused to turn over another sheet of the closely written manuscript. The tense, almost breathless silence in which his two companions had listened so far, proved that their interest had been gripped by the simple yet grimly dramatic narrative that had been penned by Silas Marle before he disappeared. When Hugh resumed reading, they could not help feeling an even greater sense of eeriness at the thought that the events he was describing took place in the very room in which they were sitting.

"It is useless for me to attempt to describe my feelings at that moment," the narrative continued. "I should judge you to be a man of some imagination: put yourself in my place, and ask yourself what your own emotions would be on finding yourself suddenly confronted with a man whom you had last seen injured—*shattered* would be a better term—beyond all possibility of recovery. Knowing as I did that one-half of his body had been totally destroyed, I was more ready to believe that the figure before my eyes was an accusing phantom, than to admit the bare possibility of his having recovered from sure (I can call it nothing else) semi-annihilation.

"At a moment such as that, time seems to stand still. I have not the faintest idea how long I remained twisted in my chair, gazing with distended eyes at the apparition. And Jake, or the *Thing that had been Jake,* remained equally immobile, with its arms raised above its head and resting on the transom that crossed the diamond-paned window. As we glared at each other, without speech or move-

ment on either side, I began to take note of the strangeness of his attire—or rather the lack of it. In spite of the bitter cold, the whole of the upper portion of his body was devoid of clothing, though I thought I could detect part of a coarse, shaggy, reddish-brown garment—which I at the time assumed to be a pair of trousers—extending from above his waist downward, until it was hidden by the window-sill. His hair was long and unkempt, falling in matted ringlets to his shoulders. On his head was what appeared to be a low-crowned, fantastic helmet decorated with a pair of huge stag's antlers, giving him an appearance that was at once grotesque and demoniacal.

"Until that moment I had never regarded myself as a superstitious man, and it was with a sub-conscious feeling very much like self-contempt that I found myself shivering and trembling like the rawest yokel when confronted with a thing beyond the scope of his shallow understanding. My very fears spurred me to action. I gained my feet with a jerk and advanced toward the window—advanced, as it seemed, through timeless eons, until I was gazing into the luminous, beast-like eyes of the nameless Thing, with but the thickness of the leaded panes between us—until I could see the slow and regular heaving of the massive chest and note the glistening of the melted snowflakes as they trickled down the knotted muscles.

"It seemed unbelievable that such a fearsome shape should draw the breath of life and radiate animal heat like a normal living thing, yet I felt some measure of confidence as I noted these natural signs. I did not stop to ask myself what devilish arts must have been employed to bring that erstwhile shattered and disembowelled body back to life; it was enough to know that it was no pale, bloodless phantom come from the grave in that dreadful guise to tax me with my crime. It lived! It breathed!—it might even be endowed with speech. . . .

" 'Who are you?' I cried in a voice I scarcely recognized as my own. 'What do you want here?'

" 'I am the man who in life was known as Crazy Jake—the man you slew by foul and damnable treachery!' came the answer, muffled by the intervening glass, yet every word falling on my heart like drops of ice-cold water. 'Look upon me and tremble, Silas Marle! For I, being dead, live again! In tumult and rending fire I was hurled to my doom—I come again in the silent watches of the night, creeping like a shadow drifted by the moon, slaying swift and sure as the shrouded Angel of Death whom I have gazed on face to face! *Look to yourself, murderer!* The poor puzzle-brained Jake has passed through the halls of death, and has returned, strong, virile, cunning, and thirsting for revenge!"

"I listened like a man in a dream as the creature threw back his elf-locks and sent a maniacal laugh ringing out into the frozen night.

" 'Ho! ho! ho! You've had your hour of triumph, Silas Marle—mine is still to come! These eyes, once glazed and lifeless, shall seek you out. These hands, once cold and stiff, shall send a dagger-thrust into your false heart—aye, and tear it smoking from your body and glut my vengeance with a feast of blood! The poor and friendless wanderer has been transformed into a being such as the eye of man has not looked upon before. I am a king!—a god!—a monster!—the Demon Monarch of the Moor! Fleet as the hunted hare—wary as the prowling fox—fierce as the bayed stag, I sweep like the wind over the broad bosom of my desolate domain, hunting by the glimpses

of the moon, slaking my thirst at the mossy pools which mirror the rosy dawn; the eternal granite crags my rough-hewn throne, the starlit vault of heaven my justice-hall. And wo to him that falls under my displeasure. Wo to *you*, who have made me what I am! Look well upon your handiwork, Silas Marle, and tremble! When next you look upon me you will know that your last hour of life is speeding to its close!'

"With a swift, threatening gesture of his naked arm, he turned and slipped from my sight, leaving me like a man who suddenly awakens from a nightmare and asks himself if it be nothing but a vision of the night. I turned and looked at the familiar room—my book lying where it had fallen from my hand, my pipe smoldering unheeded on the carpet.

"Moved by a sudden thought, I snatched up the lamp and hastened to the door. Heedless of what might be lurking in the shadows, I threw back the bolts and passed outside, lowering the lamp until its rays fell on the spot where the apparition had seemed to stand. Then indeed did I know that it was no figment of my fancy. *In the deep snow was a trail of footprints made by cloven hoofs!*

"WELL, I have nearly come to the end of my long story, and you who read this must form your own conclusions as to the real meaning of the events which I have here set down as fully and as exactly as my memory serves me. I myself was completely at a loss to decide whether the thing I had seen and conversed with was Jake's corporeal body, restored to life by some unprecedented feat of surgical science, or a supernatural form that had taken his shape.

"One thing at least was certain: the Thing—be it what it might—possessed memory and the power of speech. Its denunciation of me proved that it remembered the events which preceded the explosion—what if it remembered the secret of the composition of the human detonator which had been the cause of its assuming its present awful form? Even in my perplexity I remember being struck by the quaint and novel problem, whether it was likely that a person insane during life would appear after death as an insane ghost? Previously he had been but feeble-minded; now he was a hopeless maniac. His egoism, his grandiloquent utterances, his vain-glorious assumption of an imaginary kingship, even the sonorous phrases of the sustained rhetoric in which he proclaimed himself Monarch of the Moor, were nothing but so many symptoms of the most pronounced form of megalomania. Here was a predicament such as I had not anticipated in my utmost thoughts. Instead of being safe, my secret—the formula that could devastate a world and rend humanity to smoking fragments—was in the possession of a raving madman!

"Prudence bade me flee from the Moor and hide myself in some populous, well-policed city where I could laugh at the threats of the fantastic monster. But, although I toyed with the project, I could not leave Exmoor until I had safeguarded my secret by destroying the Terror of the Moor. It was to be a duel to the death between us, and I hope you will not accuse me of empty bravado when I say that I was fighting for something far more precious than my own life.

"It would be superfluous for me to detail the precautions with which I surrounded myself, for you have already seen them. I converted Moor Lodge into a veritable fortress and always kept a loaded weapon within arm's reach. I wished to face my ordeal alone, but my dear wife resolutely refused to leave me,

and in the end (as you already know) she paid the price of her devotion with her life. She was returning to the house at dusk when the Terror pounced upon her, no doubt mistaking her for me. She received no wound beyond a slight bruise, but she must have had full sight of the thing, and what she saw killed her as surely as a bullet in her heart. One shriek—I shall carry the echo of it in my brain to my dying day—and she never spoke again.

"After I had seen her laid to rest in the shadow of the little gray church on the hill, I returned to my empty, desolate house nursing a hatred in my heart such as I pray that you, my friend, will never experience. Till then I had fought the Terror with much the same feeling as a soldier might seek to outwit and slay a soldier of the opposing army; now I resumed my quest with a fierce and unholy joy. Before, I had been content to remain on the defensive behind barred windows and bolted doors, awaiting the attack; now, I flung caution to the winds and boldly sought the attacker instead. Day and night I roamed the great moors, armed and watchful, asking—praying—for nothing more than to meet the cloven-footed man-monster face to face.

"But well has it been said that the Devil protects his own! For a whole year I pursued my self-imposed task in vain. Vague and wild stories of a demon stag came to my ears now and then. Once it was an old crone, gathering dry sticks for her cottage fire, who fled screaming at the horned apparition she glimpsed amid the trees. Now it would be a benighted shepherd who had cowered in a ditch while a herd of wild deer thundered by, led by a four-footed creature that was neither beast nor man. A gamester who openly boasted that he would get to the bottom of the mystery was found next morning with the life choked out of him. 'A poacher's revenge,' the papers hinted, but I knew better. Time and again I found the devil footprints beside some stream, or crossing some marshy hollow, but the Thing itself I never saw—until the night you came.

"With the memory of your own experience still fresh in your mind, you can imagine what happened to me. I heard the sound of hoofs on the gravel path, threw wide the door, and charged the shape that loomed dimly through the mist, firing as I ran. Three shots—misses—then it got me. The rest you know.

"And now, my friend, you understand something of the nature of the quest on which you have embarked. You will know that there is more in your strange legacy than a mere desire for revenge on the part of an old man whose race is almost run. If, knowing all, you decide to take up the task which I shall have laid down ere you read these lines, the whole of my wealth and property is yours. Accept it without scruple, for I have neither kith nor kin to dispute your claim; and, large as it is, it is no more than an adequate reward for the extermination of the monster I have unwittingly brought into being.

"The rest is on the knees of the gods. Farewell!"

THERE was a long silence after Hugh had come to the end of the strange epistle. Hugh looked at each of his companions in turn, endeavoring to gage their thoughts. The expression of unwonted gravity on Ronnie's usually humorous features showed that his interest had been aroused, though the somewhat mocking glint in his half-closed eyes seemed to hint that he was not wholly convinced of the truth of the narrative.

The face of Detective-Inspector Renshaw betrayed nothing. It was the stolid professional mask of a man accustomed to conceal his thoughts.

"Well, what is your opinion, gentlemen?" Hugh asked at length.

"I hardly know what to think, sir." It was the detective who answered. "If I was not in possession of Sergeant Jopling's report confirming the presence on the Moor of just such another weird creature as Marle describes, I should be inclined to the opinion that Crazy Jake was not the only lunatic in the story. As it is," he shrugged and shook his head, "well, I prefer to keep an open mind."

"An unprejudiced skeptic, eh?" smiled Hugh; then he added as he turned to Ronnie: "And you?"

"Oh, I'm prepared to go further than our official friend here," declared the young doctor. "If he's a tentative skeptic, I'm prepared to declare myself an out-and-out unbeliever! Of course the poor old boy who wrote all that tosh was suffering from a lesion that is popularly known as 'bats in the belfry'."

Hugh Trenchard shook his head decisively.

"In that case you must admit that the same diagnosis applies to me," he reminded his friend. "Have you forgotten my own encounter with the cloven-footed monster?"

"By no means, old bean," drawled Ronnie. "I'm not likely to forget your extremely vivid account of that encounter. But if you'll pardon my saying so, dear boy, your description was more dramatic than convincing. If you were in the witness-box and I were the opposing K. C., I could simply tear your story to shreds. After all, what does it amount to? On a dark and misty night, while in a highly excited condition of mind, you see a series of footprints which might or might not have been made by a large deer. While examining them you are startled by a madman or practical joker declaring that he is Old King Cole, or some monarch equally mythical. Startled by his voice, the deer stampedes, bowls you over and smashes your lamp. How's that for a sane and commonplace explanation of *your* little yarn?"

Again Hugh shook his head.

"Your ingenious theory does not explain the voice which we heard in this very room—the low, sibilant voice which interrupted your declaration of disbelief in the Terror of the Moor. 'Silence, scoffer!' it said. 'Another gibe from you, and my magic lightning shall blast you as you stand!' "

"Oh, *that?*" Ronnie Brewster grinned contemptuously. "That was friend Silas's way of amusing himself at our expense. Probably he had got out of bed, crept to the head of the stairs, and was listening to me declaiming against the spook that obsessed his poor brain. Perhaps his 'magic lightning' was a reference to the wonderful detonator that he thought he had invented."

"How do you account for the roll of thunder which sounded immediately afterward?"

"Pure coincidence," shrugged Ronnie.

At this point Inspector Renshaw, who had been listening to the conversation with a puzzled frown, stepped forward.

"Pardon me, gentlemen, but you have been alluding to an incident which is news to me. Will you be good enough to describe exactly what took place?"

Briefly, but omitting no important detail, Hugh narrated the events which had taken place on the night of Joan Endean's dramatic arrival at Moor Lodge. In his desire to make everything clear, he took up the same position where he had stood when the mysterious and uncanny

voice had been heard, and, after some persuasion, induced the highly amused Ronnie to do the same. With Inspector Renshaw representing the absent girl, Hugh made a very creditable reconstruction of the scene. At the conclusion the detective made a few brief entries in his note-book.

"Thank you, gentlemen, I'm much obliged for the trouble you have taken to put me wise." He snapped the clip on his note-book and thrust it into his pocket with an air at once elated and surprized. "That's the first real clue I've had handed me since I took up the case."

He spoke with such assurance that Hugh Trenchard was conscious of a sudden feeling of apprehension. "Do you imagine that Miss Endean is involved in this matter?" he demanded sharply.

A grim smile twisted the detective's features.

"Very much involved, I'm afraid," he answered, shooting a quick glance at the tense, drawn face of his questioner. "If I might be permitted to offer you a little friendly advice, Doctor Trenchard, I would warn you to keep as far away from that young lady as possible during the next few weeks."

Hugh took a quick pace forward and gripped him by the arm.

"What!—you know her?" he gasped in a voice that betrayed the pent-up emotion he was endeavoring to repress.

At the question there came a flicker of amusement in Renshaw's keen eyes. The expression was but fleeting, and was gone in an instant; but it had not passed unnoticed either by Hugh or Ronnie.

"Know her?" the detective repeated, and there was an unmistakable innuendo in his tone. "I should say we do! The girl who calls herself Miss Joan Endean has been known to the police for years!"

17

THERE are moments in a man's life when his normal consciousness is overwhelmed and submerged beneath the surge of emotion brought about by a sudden and unexpected shock. Such a moment came to Hugh Trenchard when the detective's revelation regarding Joan Endean shattered the idol which he had enshrined within his heart. He sat listening with unheeding ears while Inspector Renshaw outlined his plan for the capture of the Terror of the Moor. To his surprize, he even found himself occasionally contributing to the discussion of ways and means; but for all the impression which subsequently remained on his clouded and preoccupied mind, the conversation might have been conducted in a language quite unknown to him.

The thought that the beautiful girl, whose eyes had looked so frankly and so fearlessly into his own, was a clever crook —'known to the police'—was like acid dropped into an open wound. In spite of his first suspicions caused by her conflicting stories when she had arrived at Moor Lodge on that night of storm and rain, in spite of the ingenious manner in which she had made him the decoy with a packet of blank papers, in spite, too, of the clever masquerade by which she had lured him to the empty house opposite Ronnie's surgery—in spite of all, he had believed and trusted her. Nay, more—he had loved this mystery girl who had come so strangely into his life. He knew it now—now that the blunt, matter-of-fact words of the police inspector had shown that his idol was not even composed of good honest clay. Masquerading under a false name, feigning to be engaged in a mission which must remain an inviolable secret, throwing dust in his eyes and making him the innocent accomplice in her schemes—she had fooled

him by tricks so cheap and threadbare that he felt a flush of anger rise to his cheeks as he pictured himself as a shallow-witted modern Don Quixote, tilting at windmills at the behest of a wily adventuress.

By heaven! she had not seen the last of him yet! He would let her see that double-crossing was a pastime that two could play at. "Keep as far away as possible from that young lady," had been Inspector Renshaw's advice, and there seemed to be no doubt that it had been tendered with all good faith. But if the police officer had deliberately planned to bring Hugh Trenchard and Joan Endean together he could scarcely have hit on a better plan, for the young doctor was now all eagerness to confront her, to tax her openly with her duplicity, and show that he had repudiated the promise of blind allegiance which she had exacted from him. Of course, he argued, her escape from Torside Sanatorium, and the subsequent attempt of Dawker to recapture her, was a carefully staged farce intended to lull his suspicions and enable her to play the part of the persecuted heroine. He felt himself shiver as the thought crossed his mind that the seemingly obtuse Sergeant Jopling might not have been so far from the truth after all when he had suspected that it was her hand that had guided the fatal dagger on the night Silas Marle was slain.

"Well, I suppose you two gentlemen are quite capable of looking after yourselves for tonight, so me and my men will be off." With a start Hugh realized that the inspector had risen to take his departure. "But I should not advise you to leave the front door on the latch—like it was when we entered." Renshaw laughed as he added: "The next stick-up gang that makes free of the house might not let you off as lightly as we did."

The two friends joined in the laugh at their expense.

"Oh, we shan't be caught napping the second time!" Ronnie said confidently. "I intend to lock my bedroom door and go through the early-Victorian ceremony of looking under the bed before I blow out the candle."

Inspector Renshaw shook his head dubiously.

"Locks don't seem to be of much account in *this* house," he mused aloud. "The local sergeant was telling me that he suspected the walls were honeycombed with secret passages and I don't know what else."

"Don't take any notice of him," grinned Ronnie. "His mind is still vibrating with the thrill of the one and only crook drama he saw in London. If we had given him a free hand, I believe he'd have ripped down every square foot of oak panelling and turned the carved chimney-pieces into so much firewood. He does not seem to be very prolific in ideas, but when one does happen to penetrate his brain, well, I reckon it would require a surgical operation to get it out again. I suppose he has told you all about the mysterious letter that dropped from nowhere on to the hall-stand?"

There was a faint smile on the inspector's lips as he nodded his head.

"The only thing he hasn't told me is how the thing managed to get there," he said quietly. "There was one of his men at the front door, one at the back, and one on the roof. The sergeant himself was sitting in the front room, and any one coming downstairs would have had to pass the open door of the room. Yet the letter was found lying on the hall-stand. You must agree that it is a bit of a mystery."

Ronnie Brewster laughed.

"I bet it wouldn't be a mystery if *I* had

been in the house at the time. Unfortunately I had just ridden off, accompanied by Doctor Trenchard here, and Nick Froude, the Harborer of the Staghounds, in an attempt to track the so-called Terror by means of the dogs."

"But," objected the detective, "you all left the house by the back entrance."

"No, by the front." It was Hugh who made the correction. "I distinctly remember taking my hat from the hall-stand, and I am certain that the only thing on it at the time was the hat belonging to my friend, Doctor Brewster."

"That's correct," confirmed Ronnie. "There certainly was no letter there when we quitted the house."

"Thank you, gentlemen. Your testimony on that point has been most helpful." Renshaw paused and stroked his chin thoughtfully, his brows drawn down so that they half veiled his keen eyes. "What you have told me has relieved my mind considerably; though I'll admit that, on the face of it, it doesn't seem to give one the slightest hint how the thing was managed. It seems rather to confirm Jopling's secret panel theory, eh? Well, good-night, gentlemen, and once more let me advise you to be careful. Remember that you are for the time being the guardians of a secret that would give an ambitious power the domination of the world, and two human lives would be but a grain of dust in the balance to any one who desired to possess it."

ON THIS not very reassuring note Inspector Renshaw took his departure. Hugh Trenchard bolted the door behind him, and on re-entering the library stood motionless for nearly a minute, thinking deeply. The inspector's parting words had brought home to him the extremely perilous nature of the secret entrusted to him by Silas Marle. When at last he glanced up, it was to catch Ronnie's eyes fixed on him with an expression of sardonic amusement.

"Getting scared?"

To the questioner's surprize Hugh nodded.

"Frankly, old chap—yes. I am scared of what might happen if the wrong people got hold of that sealed envelope. When I came out here to spend the night I little thought that I should have in my keeping a secret that has already cost the lives of two men——"

"One-and-a-half, to be exact," Ronnie corrected flippantly, "for the village idiot was only half annihilated, according to Marle's account. Not that it seems worth while going into fractions and decimals in a case like that. Anyway, what are you worrying about? Put the envelope in the safe and forget all about it till the morning."

"That safe makes me smile," Hugh declared, shaking his head. "Didn't you notice the rough way in which it has been put together? It appears to have been constructed by an amateur boiler-maker, and a live crook could simply rip it open like cutting through a sardine tin."

"He wouldn't be a 'live' crook very long after he'd started his job," Ronnie declared so confidently that his friend stared at him in amazement.

"Why not?"

"Come with me, and I'll show you."

He led the way from the room, and, crossing the dark passage with an unerring sense of direction, found and turned the handle of the door leading to the laboratory. Inside was a mere cave of velvety blackness, marked at the farther end by an oblong of slightly lighter indigo which showed the position of the single window. Ronnie struck a match and lit

the reading-lamp which stood on the desk, tilting the green shade so that the light fell full on the safe. Then, drawing a coin from his pocket, he tapped lightly on the metal door. To Hugh's surprize the sound which came forth was not the dead vibration of solid steel but the musical ring of a substance unmistakably hollow.

"Why, it's even flimsier than I thought!" he exclaimed.

Ronnie indulged in a superior smile.

"Appearances are deceptive, dear old top," he drawled. "In all probability this safe is one of the gadgets invented by the ingenious Mr. Marle for the safeguarding of his precious secret, and the fact that no attempt has been made to open it during the time the house was empty seems to indicate that it's no common specimen of the so-called burglar-proof variety. I say 'so-called' because it's a well-known fact that the up-to-date crook can open any safe in the world provided that he is left long enough undisturbed. But here, I repeat, we have something different. The oxy-acetylene blowpipe will cut through chilled and toughened steel as a warm knife goes through butter, but that flimsy-looking safe would beat the best outfit in the world. The doors and walls of that safe are nothing but so many shallow boxes made of ordinary iron boiler-plating. Heaven alone knows what diabolical chemical or gas is sealed up inside those hollow walls, but you may be sure that it is something quite capable of giving the *coup de grâce* to the enterprising cracksman who released it. The late Mr. Silas Marle had a very wide acquaintance with highly scientific methods of wafting his enemies into the inky black nowhere, and I bet he has provided something extra special for the man who tries to steal his secret by busting that safe."

Hugh could not but agree as he examined the strange contrivance, and when he discovered a small screw-valve set in one of the inner walls, and another inside the door of the safe, he felt positive that Ronnie had guessed the truth. The safe was nothing but a huge hollow tank, and the extreme care with which the outer and inner iron skins had been hermetically sealed was a silent but significant warning of the deadly possibilities which lay within. Reassured, he replaced the sealed envelope in the safe and locked the door.

There was some desultory conversation after they had returned to the library, but it was not long before Ronnie yawned and glanced at the clock.

"I think it's time that all good little boys were in bed," he declared. "I think I'll turn in now, especially as I shall have to be up pretty early in order to get to the surgery. Heigh-ho"—he yawned again—"I wish somebody would take it into his head to leave *me* a country house and a nice fat income. But it is always the undeserving that get all the luck. Which room do you intend to sleep in?" he asked suddenly. "Of course you'll give a wide berth to the one from which old Marle was spirited away?"

He gave a whistle of surprize as Hugh shook his head.

"Surely you're not going to sleep *there*—and in the same bed?"

"Why not?" There was a gleam of quiet amusement in Hugh's eyes as he asked the question. "I consider it is the most comfortable room in the house."

Ronnie shrugged and made a grimace.

"Oh, well, there's no accounting for taste. Personally, I prefer to sleep in the front, with the door locked! Bye-bye, old bean. Pleasant dreams, and all the rest of it."

With a genial nod, he quitted the room, and presently the creaking of the ancient woodwork of the staircase told that he had retired upstairs. Left to himself, Hugh Trenchard made a tour of the ground floor, closely examining the fastenings of every door and window. Satisfied on this score, he mounted the stairs and entered the room of tragic memories.

SETTING the lighted candle on the small spindle-legged table, Hugh took a quick glance round the apartment. It appeared exactly the same as when he had last seen it, on that night of grim excitement when Silas Marle had been spirited away so completely and mysteriously. There stood the great four-poster bed, its fringed canopy looking like a funereal catafalque amid the looming shadows which stretched themselves like dusky tongues across the floor, and hung in dark masses in the corners and clustered against the oak-beamed walls. The aged room seemed to have assumed a frown, menacing and malignant, as though its worm-burrowed heart were registering silent disapproval at this invasion of its drowsy sanctuary. A faint and elusive odor hung in the stagnant air. It was not exactly the stale smell exhaled by damp and decay; neither was it the lingering trace of some Old World perfume clinging to the faded tapestries. It seemed a curious combination of both, and gave rise to thoughts unpleasantly morbid and suggestive. Hugh lost no time in crossing to the window and throwing open the leaded casements to their fullest extent.

For a while he stood there, inhaling the gusts of clean, sweet air which still retained the salt tang of the sea in spite of its twenty-mile sweep across the rolling moors. The sky was almost cloudless, and the slender sickle of the moon gave just sufficient light to make the scene a world of vague shapes, sensed rather than actually seen, with here and there a glint of dull silver that marked the course of some meandering streamlet. Once the deep stillness was broken by the shrill hoot of some questing owl, and once again Hugh thought he could detect the passage of a slinking animal shape amid the tall bracken which lay beyond the confines of the house-garden —reminders that, though the great Moor seemed to sleep tranquilly, the inexorable conflict of tooth and claw knew no truce.

So absorbed was he in the quiet beauty of the night, that when he heard a faint creak of the swinging door he idly set it down as being caused by a chance current of wind. Not until he caught the sound of a faint padding footfall in the room behind him did he realize that he was not alone.

"Hullo, Ronnie!" he said, without turning his head. "So you don't find yourself so inclined for sleep as you imagined——"

He broke off with a quick gasping intake of breath as he felt something cold and hard pressed into the nape of his neck.

"Do not presume to utter a sound, Doctor Trenchard! Your friend Ronnie is sleeping as he has never slept before, and you will sleep even sounder if you do not obey me instantly. I have come here for two things—the key of the safe downstairs and the information of where I can find Miss Joan Endean. If you do not give me both within the space of the next ten seconds, I shall be under the painful necessity of cutting short a most promising career by pressing this trigger!"

Hugh stiffened like a man suddenly turned to stone. There was no mistaking those sibilant, coldly enunciated accents.

It was the voice of his arch-enemy, Professor Lucien Felger!

18

TEN seconds!

Twenty fleeting ticks of a watch—a dozen or so normal pulse-beats—the space during which two ordinary breaths might be drawn and exhaled. It was a short enough time in which to decide even the most trivial and unimportant matter, to say nothing of one which concerned his own existence—maybe the existence of countless thousands of others.

Yet Hugh Trenchard knew that he must act, and act at once. The tone of implacable menace in which Professor Felger had uttered his threat was in itself a proof that this was no empty bluff. Hugh felt quite certain that unless he agreed within the allotted ten seconds, the eleventh would see him lying with his spine shattered by the weapon whose muzzle he could feel pressing into his flesh.

Almost before the professor had ceased speaking, Hugh had taken his desperate resolve, and in his heart he thanked God for the impulse which had led him to open the windows to their fullest extent. Without daring to flex his muscles lest the movement should betray his intention, he nerved himself for what was coming.

Meanwhile Professor Felger's watchful eyes were wavering between Hugh's head and his hands, which still gripped the window-sill. The only forms of resistance he anticipated were a sudden attempt to draw a weapon, or a lightning-like swing round in an effort to grab his own. For both of these he was fully prepared, but what actually happened in the next few seconds was the very reverse to his expectations.

Without shifting his grip on the window-sill, or his eyes from their contemplation of the distant landscape, Hugh hurled himself sideways and downward through the open window.

Felger fired—the fraction of a second too late. The flash of the discharge scorched Hugh's left ear, and the crash almost deafened him, but the bullet itself whined harmlessly away in the darkness. Breathless, but unhurt, he alighted on the great heap of peat-fuel that was stacked beneath the window, and even as he rolled into the shelter of a projecting angle of brickwork, his hand groped and gripped the butt of his revolver. He felt the satisfied thrill of an armed man as he disengaged the safety catch and crooked his finger over the trigger. If Felger was alone, the odds were something like even now.

But *was* he alone? Hugh doubted that he would have undertaken his task single-handed—and did not his boast of having overpowered Ronnie imply the presence of one or more of his satellites? The thought that his friend was lying helpless in the power of these ruffians almost goaded Hugh to madness. But he knew it would be worse than madness to attempt to force his way back into the house in the face of the hail of bullets which would greet his reappearance at the window. He must get help quickly. But how?

A sound in the bushes behind him made him whirl with cat-like agility. As he raised his revolver in the direction of the faint rustling, the branches parted and Joan Endean stepped forth.

There was a bitter smile on Hugh Trenchard's lips as he thrust his weapon back into his pocket.

"So you're in this game, too?"

If the girl perceived the implied accusation in his words she made no sign. Walking proudly and erect, she advanced

until she could have touched him with her outstretched hand; until he could see the enigmatical half-smile that curved her lips as she stood regarding him.

"I was passing and I heard a shot," she said. "What has happened?"

"Passing?" he repeated with ill-concealed derision. "Passing across the Moor at this hour of the night?"

Her shoulders lifted slightly beneath the dark cloak which she wore.

"Watching, then—if you like that word better. It is not the first time I have been alone on the Moor."

Her tone of almost contemptuous defiance stung him like the lash of a whip.

"I can well believe that!" he flung back grimly. "This time, however, your help has come too late."

"Too late?"

"Yes. Your friend, the professor, has failed in his hold-up and Marle's sealed envelope is still in the safe."

"Thank God for that!" she said quickly. "But what right have you to describe Professor Felger as my friend?"

"Is he not your friend?" he demanded bluntly.

"Not so much as he is yours," she flashed back in what seemed to be a clumsy verbal parry. "You would make me out a very dreadful person, Doctor Trenchard, but do not let your prejudice blind your eyes to the identity of your real enemy. But this is no time for asking riddles, or answering them. Once again I must ask you to tell me what has happened."

SUCH was the imperiousness of her tone that, almost before he was aware of the fact, Hugh found himself giving a brief account of his late encounter.

"So you did not see Professor Felger's face?"

Hugh shook his head.

"I have never seen it. On the occasion of my former interview with him he wore a gauze antiseptic mask. But we are wasting precious time. Ronnie is inside that house, helpless — probably drugged —Felger hinted as much. I must get help——"

"Have you the key of the house?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes, but——"

"Give it to me."

He drew it from his pocket and held it out. She took it without a word, and at once stepped swiftly up the short path which led to the front door. Hugh held his breath as her slight figure rounded the angle of the house and came within the arc of fire from the windows, half expecting to see a vicious spurt of flame leap from the dark casement and hear the report of Felger's pistol. But everything within the house remained quiet as the grave. Was it a trap?

By this time Joan had the door open and was beckoning to him. "Come on—there is no danger," she called.

Hugh Trenchard's jaws set in a straight, firm line. There had seemed a subtle mockery in her assurance that roused his fighting spirit. In a dozen quick strides he reached her side.

"This is likely to be a man's work," he said, placing himself in front of her in order to lead the way into the house.

She resigned her position with a shrug, and laughed softly as her eyes fell on the revolver in his hand.

"I do not think there will be occasion to use *that*," she said coolly. "I shall be very much surprized if we find any one in that house answering to the description of Professor Lucien Felger."

"Indeed?" Hugh stared at her from beneath raised brows. "You seem tolerably well informed about the movements of this gang!"

Still smiling, she shrugged again. "Search the place and see if I am not right."

"Are you armed?" he asked suddenly.

"Knowing where the danger lies, I am doubly armed," was her oracular reply.

Without further parley Hugh made his way into the house, searching each room in turn and locking the doors behind him. On the lower floor the rooms were silent and untenanted; so, holding his weapon ready for instant use, Hugh warily mounted the stairs. A single glance was sufficient to show that there was no one lurking in the bedroom he had occupied. Satisfied on this point, he turned to the one which Ronnie had chosen.

The moment he opened the door his nostrils were assailed by a familiar, sweet, pungent odor.

"Chloroform!" he gasped as he dashed forward to the still figure that lay upon the bed. "Whew! the place reeks of it. Open the windows while I see if he is still alive."

Apparently they had not arrived a moment too soon. Ronnie Brewster lay flat on his back, his ghastly white face upturned to the ceiling, his arms and legs sprawled in grotesque angles. At first there seemed no sign of breathing; but as Hugh took up his limp hand and laid his finger on the pulse, a faint, long-drawn sigh fluttered from the lips of the unconscious man.

There was no need to seek far for the cause of his condition. On the pillow was a pad heavily soaked in chloroform, and the traces of the blistering effect of the powerful drug, apparent on Ronnie's lips and nostrils, showed that the pad had been forcibly pressed over his face. Luckily for him, however, the natural spasmodic movements which always precede complete coma had caused the cotton-wool to fall off. But for this he would have already been past all aid.

HUGH's first care was to snatch away the drugged pad and hurl it out of the open window; then he opened the door wide to allow a current of air to pass through the room. But it was not until he had soaked the towel in the water-jug and freely dabbed it over Ronnie's face that the first real signs of returning consciousness became apparent.

It was at least a quarter of an hour later before Ronnie opened his eyes and looked about him vaguely.

"What's happened?" he gasped. "Where am I?"

"You are safe, old chap. That's all you need worry about at present."

"Safe?" Ronnie repeated, looking more puzzled than ever. "What d'ye mean by 'safe'? Did we go on the binge last night? My poor head feels just like the morning after the night before, and my tummy is beginning to show the first symptoms of a choppy cross-channel trip. Sorry to trouble you, old top, but——"

Hugh lost no time in rendering the needful first-aid.

"You'll feel better presently," he assured him.

"That's a safe prediction on your part. . . . I don't think I could feel much worse!" Ronnie grunted between his spasms. "Pah! this place smells like an operating-room without the carbolic. I say, what's the giddy old idea?"

"Attempted murder—with you and me as the prospective corpses!"

"Eh? Just say that over again, will you?"

Hugh's tersely worded account of what had happened acted like a tonic on the stupefied man. His blank, bewildered look gave place to an angry frown, a flush mounted to his pallid cheeks, his limply

sagging body grew taut and finally jerked up into a sitting posture on the bed.

"The dirty dogs!—let me get my hands on that old professor and I'll teach him a lesson in dissection that'll surprize him! Here, hand me over my trousers——"

Hugh shook his head.

"My dear chap, it's quite impossible for you to get up——"

"I'll show you whether it's impossible or not!" cried Ronnie fiercely. "Give me those confounded trousers, will you? If you don't, I shall go on the war-path like one of the heroes of ancient Greece!"

"For heaven's sake don't do that!" laughed Hugh, relinquishing his hold on the desired garments. "The professor would think you were qualifying as an inmate of his institution."

Ronnie paused in his hasty dressing and gazed at his friend in boundless admiration.

"By Jove, that's a brain-wave if you like!" he exclaimed. "If one of us could only manage to get locked up in the Torside Sanatorium, we'd be able to pick up no end of clues and things. Suppose you pretend to be potty——"

"No, thanks!" Hugh declined, modestly adding: "You could act the part much more naturally than I; in fact, it might not be necessary for you to act at all! Just be your own sweet self, Ronnie, and you will not find the slightest difficulty in getting the necessary certificate."

But the young medico treated this suggestion with lofty disdain, and the remainder of his toilet was performed for the most part in a majestic silence. Only once he paused and sniffed the air.

"I don't know whether it's that damned chloroform still in my head, but I seem to smell something like frying bacon—and coffee," he added, with another sniff.

"I suppose Miss Endean is exercising her culinary abilities," Hugh hazarded with a smile.

"That girl?" The other was plainly startled. "Is she still here?"

"It would seem so."

Ronnie favored his chum with a long, puzzled stare.

"Taking into consideration the information that Inspector Renshaw gave you concerning her," he inquired slowly, "what is your candid opinion of that young lady?"

Hugh parried the direct question with a shrug. "I haven't made up my mind yet."

"And are you exercising the same commendable restraint from forming rash judgments in the case of the sinister professor?" persisted Ronnie.

"Oh, I've weighed *him* up all right," came the reply without an instant's hesitation. "He's an out-and-out crook."

"Indeed? In what particular direction does his crookedness lie?"

For a moment the bland question left Hugh nonplussed. Truth to tell, he had been so convinced of Professor Felger's guilty participation in the whole series of mysterious happenings that he had never so much as dreamt of tabulating his suspicions in a cool and orderly manner.

"Why, in every direction possible," he said at length. "Haven't I just been telling you how he attempted to hold me up in the next room a few hours since?"

"Could you swear to his identity in a court of law?" Ronnie asked calmly. "Did you recognize him?"

"You know very well that I've never seen the fellow's face," Hugh cried impatiently. "But I recognized his voice all right!"

"That's a slender thread on which to hang a grave charge, old chap," shrugged Ronnie. "I very much doubt if they'd

issue a warrant unless you could offer something more convincing than the sound of a man's voice. Voices can be imitated, you know—especially voices which speak with a slight foreign accent. Please don't go running away with the idea that I hold a brief for Felger—I only want to show you the weakness of your case before you fall into the error of making a false step. Legally speaking, you haven't got a shred of evidence against him."

"What about Silas Marle's letter? Doesn't that prove that he's an enemy agent trying to get hold of the secret self-exploding formula?"

"On the contrary, it did not so much as mention his name." Ronnie smiled as he shook his head slowly. "I fear that statement is neither definite nor conclusive. Looked at coldly and logically, what does it amount to?—Simply that an eccentric recluse named Marle said that a half-witted lout named Jake said that an unnamed man living 'at the big house' liked to hear him sing! Hearsay evidence to the third degree, and vague at that. No, no, we'll have to get hold of some more convincing evidence before we call in the police. By the way," he added as if struck by a sudden thought, "our friend Sergeant Jopling was not such a fool as we thought."

"Why?"

"He was right about the secret passage leading into this house, for by what other means could Professor Felger have entered last night?"

Hugh Trenchard stood transfixed as the full meaning of this possibility rushed upon him.

"If that is so, he might have overheard every word of our discussions—to say nothing of the contents of Marle's letter!" he exclaimed. "We *are* a first-class pair of dithering boneheads!"

"Speak for yourself, dear boy," drawled Ronnie. "Personally, I don't think we've handed the professor anything that he wasn't aware of before. For heaven's sake don't look so tragic. I've got a few stunts up my sleeve that'll rather surprize everybody—yourself included."

"Oh? And what are they?"

Ronnie grinned and shook his head, laying his finger on his lips in the manner of a stage conspirator.

"Not here, dear boy—walls have ears, you know. I'll let you into my secret when the time is ripe. In the meantime, I think I might manage to peck at a slice of dry toast and a cup of coffee."

THE cold gray light of the early dawn had crept unnoticed through the windows as they talked, and its wan illumination did not invest the gloomy oak-panelled interior of Moor Lodge with any additional cheerfulness. Hugh Trenchard felt a slight shiver pass down his spine as he descended the cramped staircase. He found himself eyeing the age-darkened walls with a new and disquieting interest, speculating which of the squares of carved wood might be concealing a lurking enemy. Secret doors might sound very romantic when regarded in the abstract, but when one has made up one's mind to live alone in a house with such a sinister reputation as Moor Lodge, they are an interesting link with the "good old days" with which one would willingly dispense. He felt a twinge of compunction as he remembered how unmercifully he had chaffed Sergeant Jopling about his "crook-drama theory" (as he had honestly thought it to be then), and he determined that he would take the first opportunity of offering something more solid than a mere verbal apology as a balm for that worthy officer's ruffled feelings.

As the two men entered the living-room they seemed to step into a new and cheerier world. The lamp had been trimmed and lit, the fire replenished, its ruddy glow reflected in the coffee-pot and covered dishes which stood on the old-fashioned hearth. The place looked tidier and more homey already, and the neatly laid table, with its bunch of freshly plucked late roses in the center, showed subtle yet unmistakable touches which indicated a feminine hand. But there was no sign of the girl herself, and Hugh stepped back to the door and called.

"Miss Endean!" Hearing no reply, he made his way into the brick-floored kitchen. "It's awfully good of you to have taken pity on two helpless bachelors, and I wish to thank——"

The words died on his lips as he realized that he was speaking to the empty air. Switching on his torch, he hurried from room to room, yet in his heart he knew his search was useless.

"She's gone!" he announced blankly as he re-entered the living-room.

Ronnie paused in the act of demolishing a generous helping of fried eggs and bacon.

"What, again?" he queried satirically. "My word! what a girl she is for performing the vanishing-trick! She seems to be a veritable will-o'-the-wisp of the female species, but"—he gave a warning grimace before turning to refill his coffee-cup—"but don't follow her pretty little lodestar too closely, or you may find yourself up to your neck in the bog of trouble."

"Your metaphor is rotten, Ronnie."

"Maybe, but my advice is sound." There was a note of unwonted gravity in the usually bantering voice. "Think it over, old chap, *and keep clear of Joan Endean!*"

19

THOUGH Hugh Trenchard felt half dead for want of sleep, he managed to put in a fairly busy morning. No sooner had Ronnie taken his departure in the car than he put on his cap and proceeded to make a thorough inspection of the ground in the immediate vicinity of the house. He argued that if there really was a secret passage leading inside the house, its outlet could not be very far beyond its walls. The lodge had been built in a bygone age when such devices were not uncommon, and he was determined not to spend another night there until he had done his best to settle the question one way or the other.

The possibilities of the small garden at the rear of the house were soon exhausted. No such outlet could exist among the clipped box hedges and symmetrical flower beds; nor did the most careful scrutiny of the paved paths reveal a single slab large enough to admit the passage of a man.

In front of the house, and about twenty yards distant, lay the steeply sloping escarpment of the combe, or narrow valley, up which he had raced on the night of his first arrival at Moor Lodge. The face nearest the house was for the most part a sloping wilderness of dense brushwood, with here and there an outcropping granite boulder. At one place a narrow path, provided with roughly hewn steps at the steepest parts, zigzagged downward, and at first sight this seemed the sole means of traversing the cliff. It was not until Hugh had pushed aside the bushes which bordered the path that he discovered more than one rocky ledge by which an active man might make his way along the face of the ravine in a horizontal direction. There was one, slightly broader than the rest, that particularly attracted his attention.

As far as he could trace its course amid the confusing overgrowth of vegetation, it seemed to lead directly to an immense buttress of granite, a fantastic weather-scarred mass that must weigh scores of tons, which jutted precariously far over the abyss of the gorge. Comparing its position with the brow of the cliff, Hugh came to the conclusion that its base must be less than a dozen yards below the foundations of Moor Lodge. From the safe vantage-ground of the path he examined it long and carefully, and at length his straining eyes seemed to detect a darker patch of shadow which might possibly be a crevice large enough to admit the passage of a man.

At this he hesitated no longer. Thrusting aside the bushes, he began to make his way cautiously along the shelf rock, steadying his progress by grasping an occasional gnarled root which thrust itself from a soil-filled cranny, though he was well aware that such would have been but a poor support should a false step compel him to rest his whole weight upon it. It was with a feeling of intense relief that he found the narrow ledge resolving itself into a fairly safe path, such as might be traversed at night by one familiar with its devious windings. The half-hearted interest with which he had begun the adventure now gave place to a feeling of elated excitement. Here, if anywhere, would he find the answer to the riddle that had so puzzled him.

Suddenly he stopped, every nerve a-quiver. He was passing a spot where earth had been washed down onto the rocky path, and in the moist soil was a distinct imprint of a human foot. Although it was not the mysterious cloven sign that he had learned to dread, the sight was significant enough, for it proved that some one was in the habit of using this secret path along the cliff.

He bent down and examined it closely. It had been made by a fairly large-sized boot, though the absence of hob-nails seemed to rule out the possibility of it being due to the chance passage of some shepherd or game-keeper. Straightening up, Hugh Trenchard slipped his revolver from his pocket and silently crept toward the fissure in the cliff face, which he had rightly conjectured to be the entrance of a cave.

Every muscle held ready for instant action, he rounded the last boulder; then:

"Good morning, Doctor Trenchard," said a bluff, hearty voice. "I've been waiting for you."

For a moment Hugh stared at the smiling face before recognition came.

"Inspector Renshaw!" he gasped. "I little thought of meeting you!"

"Evidently not," said the police officer dryly, glancing at the revolver which Hugh still held trained on him. "I'd feel more at ease if you would put that thing back in your pocket."

Hugh complied with a muttered apology, but the other cut him short.

"Oh, I'm not blaming you for being careful," he said smilingly, as he led the way into the cave. "I've been watching you from the first moment you appeared on the cliff, and when I saw you start along that ledge I knew you wouldn't be prepared to find a friend at the other end. So I thought it policy to speak first—in case of accidents," he added grimly.

Hugh was looking about with lively interest. Though of irregular shape, the cave was far roomier and loftier than he had expected, and there were many evidences that the inspector had prepared for a long stay. There was a heap of tinned provisions in one corner, a couch of dry bracken covered with a brown blanket in another; a kettle, a saucepan,

and an oil cooker completed the domestic arrangements. But what attracted his attention most was the passage-like aperture which opened from the innermost corner of the rocky chamber.

"Where does that lead to?" he asked quickly.

Inspector Renshaw looked at him for an instant without speaking, apparently undecided how far to take him into his confidence.

"I will show you something that will surprize you," he said at length. "Follow me."

Unhooking a portable electric lamp from a peg driven into a crevice in the rock wall, he switched it on and led the way through the narrow aperture. With growing excitement Hugh saw that the tunnel, unlike the cavern they had just quitted, had walls comparatively smooth, and in places he could even distinguish the marks of the tools with which they had been hewn.

"This passage has been made for a definite purpose," he exclaimed, his voice sending weird echoes booming hollowly out of the wall of blackness ahead.

"Speak lower," warned his guide. "This place carries sound like a huge speaking-tube, and it would spoil my plans if its existence became known. Yes," he went on, in answer to Hugh's question, "this is nothing more nor less than an abandoned mine, so ancient that its very existence has been forgotten."

"Mine?" repeated Hugh, with a dubious shake of his head. "What sort of mineral could have been dug out of here?"

Renshaw shrugged.

"I'm afraid I'm not sufficiently expert in mineralogy, sir, to answer that question. But there are plenty of old workings in the Mendip Hills—some thirty miles away in a northeasterly direction—where they used to get lead-ore and calamine, and some of them are being operated at the present time. I should say that this has been a mine of that description. You'll notice that the galleries do not run in a straight line, but wind about as they followed the veins of ore. There are about a couple of dozen side passages. There is one of them——"

He swung the beam of his lamp to the left, and Hugh caught a glimpse of the mouth of a tunnel that was even narrower and lower than the one they were traversing.

"Where does it lead to?" he asked.

"I haven't explored that particular one," Renshaw answered carelessly. "I took a look down a few of them, but they all ended suddenly, some in clayey earth, others in a kind of black rock. I suppose they were abandoned when the veins petered out."

"Where does this particular tunnel lead?" Hugh was conscious of a vague feeling of uneasiness as he put the question. "We must have travelled a fairly good distance—though the air is fresh enough. Where are we?"

"You'll see in a few minutes," the detective parried, at the same time half turning and throwing a smiling glance at Hugh.

Ever since they had entered the tunnel Hugh had noticed that the ground had been sloping gently upward. Now, however, the tunnel took a steeper incline. Presently Renshaw paused and pointed to a roughly drawn arrow, chalked on the rock at the entrance to another side passage.

"I put that there so that I shouldn't miss my way," he explained. "We turn off here."

A dozen paces in this new direction, and Hugh was conscious of a strong current of air blowing in his face. The

dank smell of moist earth assailed his nostrils. Involuntarily he slackened his pace.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked again.

The man with the lamp walked on without replying. Hugh raised his voice slightly.

"I will not go another step until I have an answer. For the last time—where am I?"

"At the end of your journey, Doctor Trenchard."

Abruptly the light was extinguished, leaving him in a darkness complete and impenetrable as that of a sealed tomb.

The Terror of the Moor kills again in the thrilling chapters of this story in next month's WEIRD TALES. Do not fail to read it.

Children of the Moon

(The Moths)

By A. LESLIE

Flitter, flutter, through the dark!
Like an ever-glowing spark:
On my wings the moonlight rides,
Ghostly starlight bands my sides.
Flitter, flutter, through the flame;
Flutter—'twas a sorry game!

Singed and crumpled now I lie,
And you think to watch me die!
I have left you as I gaze;
Ghostly wings your lips just graze.
Flitter, flutter, through the dark!
Careful, I will leave my mark
In your heart and on your soul
(I am kin to elf and troll);
You will see strange shapes flit by,
Ghastly riders of the sky;
You will wander 'neath the moon,
Harkening to a soundless croon.

Mock me not as here I lie
(While you are you and I am I);
For, lean close, I'll whisper true,
I was once a man, like you!

Supper for Thirteen

By JULIUS LONG

Novalis played a ghastly jest on his dinner guests—a brief tale of a weird crime

THE twelve guests gasped when, at the last stroke of midnight, their host ushered them into the room where the supper was laid. Its grim aspect quite confounded them and held them breathless while they rapidly surveyed its grotesquerie.

The room, they saw at once, was built within the great dining-room in which Novalis ordinarily entertained his guests. The drab walls were of unadorned gray. The ceiling appeared uncannily high, for the horizontal proportions of the enclosure were considerably less than those of the chamber which contained it. The floor was superimposed and, like the walls, of lifeless gray. The nervous clatter of heels upon its uncarpeted surface was metallic. The walls, too, seemed to be of metal, though it was difficult to make certain in the dim light. The sole illumination was afforded by heavily barred and loftily situated windows through which penetrated the pale blue rays of artificially created moonlight.

But that which struck the open-mouthed guests as being the most singular of the appointments was the unique set of chairs placed about the two sides and one end of the rectangular table on which the supper was laid. A shudder escaped from the awed group as it recognized these pieces to be clever duplicates of the electric chair. It dawned upon them at once that this bizarrely outfitted room was meant to represent a prison death-house.

A nervous laugh broke the silence; then various strained exclamations, no doubt intended to be uttered in a tone both light and appreciative, resounded in the metallic enclosure. "Well, Novalis, you've done it again!" . . . "By heaven! this is weird!" . . . "Wherever did you get the idea?" . . . "Good old Novalis! he never bores!" . . . "Another brilliant supper party!" etc.

Throughout this effusion of compliments, Novalis maintained an air of complete indifference, smiling dryly at the undercurrent of vague uneasiness which the vociferous enthusiasm only partly concealed. A slight motion of his head caused thirteen servitors costumed as prison guards to materialize suddenly from the shadows.

The guests, perceptibly intimidated by these grim figures, moved to the chairs as if under compulsion. To their discomfort and dismay, the servitors, acting simultaneously, strapped electrodes to their ankles and lowered black helmets upon their heads. As one man, they looked to Novalis, seated at the end of the table, and were reassured to discover that he, too, was subjected to the same indignities. Despite this assurance, perspiration beaded their brows and moistened their strained cheeks. Even the most nonchalant among them felt that Novalis' eccentricity had carried him beyond the bounds of propriety. His zeal to astonish and amuse his guests had gotten the better of him. This nonsense of

rigging them up in death chairs was pretty far-fetched. Worse—it was decidedly annoying.

Ill at ease, they eyed one another in a restrained fashion, the heavy cord to their head-gear just flexible enough to allow moderate movement.

"I wonder," remarked Tannen, the painter, "that you did not put us in strait-jackets."

The other guests, their pent-up excitation momentarily loosed, burst into exaggerated laughter. With mingled emotions, they saw the servitors retire and heard the steel-paneled doors close after them, the key grate in the lock.

"Are we locked in, then?" asked Morrison, the music critic, in a tone that fell short of levity.

Novalis nodded carelessly. His guests, resigned to his eccentricity, sought to distract themselves in the supper laid upon the deal table before them. This was quite easy to do, for the food was indeed seductive. Exquisite viands, rare and odd game, delicacies from all over the world were prepared for them. A fairly inexhaustible supply of wine of priceless vintages—Roussillon, Tenedos, Oporto—soon dissipated their coldness and brought them gay assurance. Even the most timid became voluble. Anecdotes were freely related, and it is not surprizing that their subjects were gruesome and weird. Each guest had his tale of murder or death, his story of ghosts or of sorcery.

At first, the tone was light and frivolous, each raconteur endeavoring to impress his listeners with the fact of his own disbelief.

De Severas, the author—a professional liar—affected from habit to be more sincere. He related the story of a famous bibliophile who all his life waged a war upon the censorship and expurgation of literature. After his death, his widow nightly visited his tomb and read to him from his favorite books, expurgating, however, such passages as offended her mid-Victorian taste.

By almost imperceptible stages, the mood became more serious and the contents of the yarns more factual. Tales which the guests had heretofore not dared to recount were now freely told. The story related by Bartram, the physician, was typical:

"Some years ago, I had as patient a very wealthy man who was unhappily married to a woman much younger than himself. I suspected that she would be overjoyed if I failed to save his life. My patient, too, voiced my feeling. 'Every day that I live,' he once confided to me, 'my death becomes twenty-four hours less timely.'

"I prescribed for the unhappy man an arsenical drug which was to be administered at very definite intervals. At first, it brought about an improved condition; then, to my surprize, the patient died. It was not until his widow had rushed the body to the crematory that it dawned upon me that she might have poisoned him by lessening the intervals between the doses. The more I brooded over the matter, the more I became certain that my suspicions were well founded. Of course, it was too late for an autopsy.

"Some months later the widow became stricken by the same disease which had threatened the life of her husband. I was called, and I prescribed again the arsenical drug. 'These capsules must not be taken oftener than once every hour,' I warned both her and the nurse. 'To decrease the interval even by a very few minutes would prove fatal.'

"The stricken woman shrilly laughed. 'Oh! my dear, departed husband will

guard over me!' she exclaimed enigmatically. This remark puzzled me, and I privately questioned the nurse as to its meaning. She explained that the widow had placed her late husband's ashes in a specially constructed hour-glass. It tickled her perverted sense of humor to watch these ashes filter through the glass. Her assertion that her husband would guard over her implied that she intended that the doses of the arsenical drug were to be spaced by this appalling toy. If I had had any doubt as to the woman's guilt in the mysterious death of her husband, it was dissipated by this singular information.

"Early the following morning, I was summoned by the almost hysterical nurse. I arrived upon the scene to find the patient dead. The tearful girl explained that she had faithfully given the drug as prescribed and had spaced the doses with the hour-glass as her patient had requested. She discovered to her dismay that the ashes had passed through the glass so rapidly that she had given fifteen doses within a space of ten hours. By this time, her patient was dying and shortly thereafter she succumbed.

"Of course, I checked up on the hour-glass, as did the coroner and a committee from the medical association. The strange thing is that we found it to be invariably accurate. I have it now in my office, and I have never since known it to err a second. Often I have regarded the slowly filtering ashes of the [illegible] awe and have wonder[illegible] of death was accide[illegible] am inclined more and[illegible] that the death of the[illegible] vengeance wreaked b[illegible] that his ashes, by the[illegible] with which they passed[illegible] glass, caused her to die[illegible] he had died at her hands.

After many such tales had been told, the guests turned to their host. He had listened to the story- telling apathetically, his mind ostensibly preoccupied. He was, and always had been, unfathomable to his acquaintances—it would perhaps be presumption to refer to any man as his friend. There was about the expression of his eyes a hint of madness which had often disturbed his associates and now disconcerted these guests tonight. One had always the impression, no matter how dense the crowd of which he formed a part, that he was alone. His thoughts appeared to be many thousands of miles removed. Those who had been introduced into his house felt that they had been invited to afford amusement. They were lured only by the knowledge that his invitations bespoke an evening of rare and original entertainment. He never offered those sophomoric bacchanals which are the height of diversion to the would-be sophisticated. He never failed to devise some highly ingenious treat for jaded minds.

"Why don't you contribute to our lore?" asked Arbuthnot, the lawyer. "It isn't fair for you to shirk your duty while we regale you with yarns."

"I have not been entertained," replied Novalis coldly; "therefore it is not incumbent upon me to entertain."

The *amour-propre* of the story-tellers winced under this blow.

"And why have you not been enter[illegible]ined?" demanded De Severas savagely, [illegible]professional, he was the most

[illegible]fine-drawn features distorted [illegible]nto a derisive grimace.

[illegible]urderers and murderesses in[illegible]upon some sordid and tawdry [illegible]. They always murder for [illegible]are unconscionable material[illegible]her imagination nor ideals.

They study the technique of murder only to prostitute it to base ends. They do not murder for murder's sake, but for the sake of some material advancement. Murder for murder's sake is seldom, if ever, accounted. It was a long time before artists had the courage to cultivate art for art's sake; the time is remote when the murderer may apply himself with equal disinterestedness to his art."

"Tell us, then, of a murderer who murdered for murder's sake," suggested Ingalls, the sculptor.

"I shall do more," said Novalis simply. "Tonight I shall offer for your delectation the actual enactment of such a crime."

"Oh, ho!" laughed the guests, some of their nervousness, however, returning upon them. "Bring on your murderer and produce his victims!"

Novalis smiled without mirth and eyed his guests severally. His face, like their own, was rendered ghastly by the artificial moonlight. His manner was so apathetic and uninterested that it was hard to believe he was sincere.

"I am the murderer," he said lazily, "and you are my victims."

For a fraction of a second there was a burst of laughter; then it abruptly subsided, and those who had been so amused eyed Novalis sternly.

"Just what do you mean?" demanded Arbuthnot.

Novalis silently reached forward and lifted from the table a huge silver cover which the guests had supposed to conceal a neglected roast. They looked stupidly at the two copper switches which were revealed. These were both open, and without ado Novalis seized the handle of one and closed it. There was a slight flashing of sparks, and then was heard the low drone of a distant dynamo. The muffled hum brought an indefinable terror to the hearts of the huddled guests. They eyed Novalis fearfully.

"I assure you, my friends, that I bear you no malice. My motives in this instance are purely artistic. I sacrifice you to art alone. You should be proud to be the victims in such an artistically and ingeniously contrived murder. Forgive my pride."

The twelve men started in their chairs. "Surely——"

There was a wild scramble to be free of the harness, but Novalis was too quick. With a swift, decisive effort, he drew down the handle of the second switch. The flash of sparks illuminated the gloom as the thirteen men plunged forward upon the table, their faces distorted, their every muscle drawn taut by the terrific voltage which surged through their bodies. An odor of burning flesh began to suffuse the room. The hand of the murderer still grasped the switch as a burst of flame from the littered table made a roaring furnace of the metallic room.

Old House

By MARVIN LUTER HILL

This is a house with the evil in it
  Of men, long dead, who lived therein;
Pause by the hearth, the bed, the spinet,
  You think immediately of sin,

See before your mental vision
  Ghastly things that make you creep;
Though you laugh out in derision,
  They will haunt you in your sleep.

Turn away, and let the swathy
  Silken-fringèd curtains fall
At your back, and pass the frothy
  Witch-brewed bitters in the hall,

Where, at times, unhallowed fingers
  Dip within the jeweled urn,
And the poisoned touch still lingers,
  Causing them to hiss and burn.

Walk down the steps that are made of marble—
  Three round steps like a soldier's tomb—
You will hear the ghost of a linnet warble
  Out in the depths of the cedars' gloom,

Feel the silent tread behind you
  Of stark feet, bone-white and cold;
Do not look, or a face will blind you
  That is too hideous to behold.

This is a house the dead inhabit—
  Come outside where the moon is clear;
Think of a dove, or a snowy rabbit,
  Leave the thoughts of the dead men here.

The People of the Black Circle

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A stupendous story of Conan the barbarian soldier of fortune, and a tremendous adventure in the castle of the Black Seers

The Story Thus Far

YASMINA DEVI, queen of Vendhya, sought vengeance for her brother, King Bhunda Chand, who had met his death through the sorcery of the Black Seers of Yimsha, magicians who dwelt on a mountain in Ghulistan. She did not know that his death was part of a plot of King Yezdigerd of Turan to conquer Vendhya. Yezdigerd had enlisted the aid of the Black Seers and sent to Vendhya a spy, Kerim Shah, accompanied by Khemsa, an acolyte of the Black Seers, to destroy the royal family.

Yasmina wished to secure the assistance of Conan, a Cimmerian, but chief of the Afghulis of Ghulistan, a wild country of barbarians. At her orders the governor of Peshkhauri, a border city, captured seven Afghuli headmen and threatened to hang them unless Conan put his forces at her disposal. But Conan came to Peshkhauri by night and kidnapped the Devi herself and carried her into the hills, as a hostage for the release of his men.

Gitara, Yasmina's treacherous maid, persuaded Khemsa to rebel against his masters, the Black Seers, and try to capture Yasmina from Conan to wring a huge ransom from Vendhya. Khemsa employed his sorcery to kill the seven Afghuli captives, so they could not be used by the governor to obtain Yasmina's release, and with Gitara, followed Conan and his prisoner into the hills. Kerim Shah, deserted by Khemsa, dispatched a message to the satrap of Secunderam, a Turanian outpost, ordering an army to be sent to Afghulistan to capture the Devi from Conan, and rode into the hills to meet the oncoming army and guide it.

In the meantime Conan, pursued by the governor's troops, had sought shelter with his friend Yar Afzal, chief of the Wazulis. Khemsa killed Yar Afzal with his magic, and tricked the Wazulis into attacking Conan, meaning to steal the Devi during the fight. But Conan escaped from the village on Yar Afzal's black stallion, carrying Yasmina with him; and Khemsa, approaching through a defile in the hills, was surprized and knocked down by the rush of the horse. The Wazulis, pursuing Conan, attacked Khemsa, who loosed upon them all the horrors of his black magic.

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6. *The Mountain of the Black Seers*

"WHERE now?" Yasmina was trying to sit erect on the rocking saddlebow, clutching her captor. She was conscious of a recognition of shame that she should not find unpleasant the feel of his muscular flesh under her fingers.

"To Afghulistan," he answered. "It's a perilous road, but the stallion will carry us easily, unless we fall in with some of your friends, or my tribal enemies. Now that Yar Afzal is dead, those damned Wazulis will be on our heels. I'm surprized we haven't sighted them behind us already."

This story began in WEIRD TALES for September

"He heard Yasmina scream."

"Who was that man you rode down?" she asked.

"I don't know. I never saw him before. He's no Ghuli, that's certain. What the devil he was doing there is more than I can say. There was a girl with him, too."

"Yes." Her gaze was shadowed. "I can not understand that. That girl was my maid, Gitara. Do you suppose she was coming to aid me? That the man was a friend? If so, the Wazulis have captured them both."

"Well," he answered, "there's nothing we can do. If we go back, they'll skin us both. I can't understand how a girl like that could get this far into the mountains with only one man—and he a robed scholar, for that's what he looked like. There's something infernally queer in all this. That fellow Yar Afzal beat and sent away—he moved like a man walking

in his sleep. I've seen the priests of Zamora perform their abominable rituals in their forbidden temples, and their victims had a stare like that man. The priests looked into their eyes and muttered incantations, and then the people became like walking dead men, with glassy eyes, doing as they were ordered.

"And then I saw what the fellow had in his hand, which Yar Afzal picked up. It was like a big black jade bead, such as the temple girls of Yezud wear when they dance before the black stone spider which is their god. Yar Afzal held it in his hand, and he didn't pick up anything else. Yet when he fell dead, a spider, like the god at Yezud, only smaller, ran out of his fingers. And then, when the Wazulis stood uncertain there, a voice cried out for them to kill me, and I know that voice didn't come from any of the warriors, nor from the women who watched by the huts. It seemed to come from *above*."

Yasmina did not reply. She glanced at the stark outlines of the mountains all about them and shuddered. Her soul shrank from their gaunt brutality. This was a grim, naked land where anything might happen. Age-old traditions invested it with shuddery horror for anyone born in the hot, luxuriant southern plains.

The sun was high, beating down with fierce heat, yet the wind that blew in fitful gusts seemed to sweep off slopes of ice. Once she heard a strange rushing above them that was not the sweep of the wind, and from the way Conan looked up, she knew it was not a common sound to him, either. She thought that a strip of the cold blue sky was momentarily blurred, as if some all but invisible object had swept between it and herself, but she could not be sure. Neither made any comment, but Conan loosened his knife in his scabbard.

They were following a faintly marked path dipping down into ravines so deep the sun never struck bottom, laboring up steep slopes where loose shale threatened to slide from beneath their feet, and following knife-edge ridges with blue-hazed echoing depths on either hand.

THE sun had passed its zenith when they crossed a narrow trail winding among the crags. Conan reined the horse aside and followed it southward, going almost at right angles to their former course.

"A Galzai village is at one end of this trail," he explained. "Their women follow it to a well, for water. You need new garments."

Glancing down at her filmy attire, Yasmina agreed with him. Her cloth-of-gold slippers were in tatters, her robes and silken under-garments torn to shreds that scarcely held together decently. Garments meant for the streets of Peshkhauri were scarcely appropriate for the crags of the Himelians.

Coming to a crook in the trail, Conan dismounted, helped Yasmina down and waited. Presently he nodded, though she heard nothing.

"A woman coming along the trail," he remarked. In sudden panic she clutched his arm.

"You will not—not kill her?"

"I don't kill women ordinarily," he grunted; "though some of these hill-women are she-wolves. No," he grinned as at a huge jest. "By Crom, I'll *pay* for her clothes! How is that?" He displayed a handful of gold coins, and replaced all but the largest. She nodded, much relieved. It was perhaps natural for men to slay and die; her flesh crawled at the thought of watching the butchery of a woman.

Presently a woman appeared around

the crook of the trail—a tall, slim Galzai girl, straight as a young sapling, bearing a great empty gourd. She stopped short and the gourd fell from her hands when she saw them; she wavered as though to run, then realized that Conan was too close to her to allow her to escape, and so stood still, staring at them with a mixed expression of fear and curiosity.

Conan displayed the gold coin.

"If you will give this woman your garments," he said, "I will give you this money."

The response was instant. The girl smiled broadly with surprize and delight, and, with the disdain of a hillwoman for prudish conventions, promptly yanked off her sleeveless embroidered vest, slipped down her wide trousers and stepped out of them, twitched off her wide-sleeved shirt, and kicked off her sandals. Bundling them all in a bunch, she proffered them to Conan, who handed them to the astonished Devi.

"Get behind that rock and put these on," he directed, further proving himself no native hillman. "Fold your robes up into a bundle and bring them to me when you come out."

"The money!" clamored the hill girl, stretching out her hands eagerly. "The gold you promised me!"

Conan flipped the coin to her, she caught it, bit, then thrust it into her hair, bent and caught up the gourd and went on down the path, as devoid of self-consciousness as of garments. Conan waited with some impatience while the Devi, for the first time in her pampered life, dressed herself. When she stepped from behind the rock he swore in surprize, and she felt a curious rush of emotions at the unrestrained admiration burning in his fierce blue eyes. She felt shame, embarrassment, yet a stimulation of vanity she had never before experienced, and a tingling when meeting the impact of his eyes. He laid a heavy hand on her shoulder and turned her about, staring avidly at her from all angles.

"By Crom!" said he. "In those smoky, mystic robes you were aloof and cold and far off as a star! Now you are a woman of warm flesh and blood! You went behind that rock as the Devi of Vendhya; you come out as a hill girl—though a thousand times more beautiful than any wench of the Zhaibar! You were a goddess—now you are real!"

He spanked her resoundingly, and she, recognizing this as merely another expression of admiration, did not feel outraged. It was indeed as if the changing of her garments had wrought a change in her personality. The feelings and sensations she had suppressed rose to domination in her now, as if the queenly robes she had cast off had been material shackles and inhibitions.

But Conan, in his renewed admiration, did not forget that peril lurked all about them. The farther they drew away from the region of the Zhaibar, the less likely he was to encounter any Kshatriya troops. On the other hand he had been listening all throughout their flight for sounds that would tell him the vengeful Wazulis of Khurum were on their heels.

SWINGING the Devi up, he followed her into the saddle and again reined the stallion westward. The bundle of garments she had given him, he hurled over a cliff, to fall into the depths of a thousand-foot gorge.

"Why did you do that?" she asked. "Why did you not give them to the girl?"

"The riders from Peshkhauri are combing these hills," he said. "They'll be ambushed and harried at every turn, and by way of reprisal they'll destroy every village they can take. They may turn west-

ward any time. If they found a girl wearing your garments, they'd torture her into talking, and she might put them on my trail."

"What will she do?" asked Yasmina.

"Go back to her village and tell her people that a stranger attacked her," he answered. "She'll have them on our track, all right. But she had to go on and get the water first; if she dared go back without it, they'd whip the skin off her. That gives us a long start. They'll never catch us. By nightfall we'll cross the Afghuli border."

"There are no paths or signs of human habitation in these parts," she commented. "Even for the Himelians this region seems singularly deserted. We have not seen a trail since we left the one where we met the Galzai woman."

For answer he pointed to the northwest, where she glimpsed a peak in a notch of the crags.

"Yimsha," grunted Conan. "The tribes build their villages as far from that mountain as they can."

She was instantly rigid with attention.

"Yimsha!" she whispered. "The mountain of the Black Seers!"

"So they say," he answered. "This is as near as I ever approached it. I have swung north to avoid any Kshatriya troops that might be prowling through the hills. The regular trail from Khurum to Afghulistan lies farther south. This is an ancient one, and seldom used."

She was staring intently at the distant peak. Her nails bit into her pink palms.

"How long would it take to reach Yimsha from this point?"

"All the rest of the day, and all night," he answered, and grinned. "Do you want to go there? By Crom, it's no place for an ordinary human, from what the hill people say."

"Why do they not gather and destroy the devils that inhabit it?" she demanded.

"Wipe out wizards with swords? Anyway, they never interfere with people, unless the people interfere with them. I never saw one of them, though I've talked with men who swore they had. They say they've glimpsed people from the tower among the crags at sunset or sunrise—tall, silent men in black robes."

"Would you be afraid to attack them?"

"I?" The idea seemed a new one to him. "Why, if they imposed upon me, it would be my life or theirs. But I have nothing to do with them. I came to these mountains to raise a following of human beings, not to war with wizards."

Yasmina did not at once reply. She stared at the peak as at a human enemy, feeling all her anger and hatred stir in her bosom anew. And another feeling began to take dim shape. She had plotted to hurl against the masters of Yimsha the man in whose arms she was now carried. Perhaps there was another way, besides the method she had planned, to accomplish her purpose. She could not mistake the look that was beginning to dawn in this wild man's eyes as they rested on her. Kingdoms have fallen when a woman's slim white hands pulled the strings of destiny. Suddenly she stiffened, pointing.

"Look!"

Just visible on the distant peak there hung a cloud of peculiar aspect. It was a frosty crimson in color, veined with sparkling gold. This cloud was in motion; it rotated, and as it whirled it contracted. It dwindled to a spinning taper that flashed in the sun. And suddenly it detached itself from the snow-tipped peak, floated out over the void like a gay-hued feather, and became invisible against the cerulean sky.

"What could that have been?" asked the girl uneasily, as a shoulder of rock

shut the distant mountain from view; the phenomenon had been disturbing, even its beauty.

"The hillmen call it Yimsha's Carpet, whatever that means," answered Conan. "I've seen five hundred of them running as if the devil were at their heels, to hide themselves in caves and crags, because they saw that crimson cloud float up from the peak. What in——"

They had advanced through a narrow, knife-cut gash between turreted walls and emerged upon a broad ledge, flanked by a series of rugged slopes on one hand, and a gigantic precipice on the other. The dim trail followed this ledge, bent around a shoulder and reappeared at intervals far below, working a tedious way downward. And emerging from the gut that opened upon the ledge, the black stallion halted short, snorting. Conan urged him on impatiently, and the horse snorted and threw his head up and down, quivering and straining as if against an invisible barrier.

CONAN swore and swung off, lifting Yasmina down with him. He went forward, with a hand thrown out before him as if expecting to encounter unseen resistance, but there was nothing to hinder him, though when he tried to lead the horse, it neighed shrilly and jerked back. Then Yasmina cried out, and Conan wheeled, hand starting to knife-hilt.

Neither of them had seen him come, but he stood there, with his arms folded, a man in a camel-hair robe and a green turban. Conan grunted with surprize to recognize the man the stallion had spurned in the ravine outside the Wazuli village.

"Who the devil are you?" he demanded.

The man did not answer. Conan noticed that his eyes were wide, fixed, and of a peculiar luminous quality. And those eyes held his like a magnet.

Khemsa's sorcery was based on hypnotism, as is the case with most Eastern magic. The way has been prepared for the hypnotist for untold centuries of generations who have lived and died in the firm conviction of the reality and power of hypnotism, building up, by mass thought and practise, a colossal though intangible atmosphere against which the individual, steeped in the traditions of the land, finds himself helpless.

But Conan was not a son of the East. Its traditions were meaningless to him; he was the product of an utterly alien atmosphere. Hypnotism was not even a myth in Cimmeria. The heritage that prepared a native of the East for submission to the mesmerist was not his.

He was aware of what Khemsa was trying to do to him; but he felt the impact of the man's uncanny power only as a vague impulsion, a tugging and pulling that he could shake off as a man shakes spider-webs from his garments.

Aware of hostility and black magic, he ripped out his long knife and lunged, as quick on his feet as a mountain lion.

But hypnotism was not all of Khemsa's magic. Yasmina, watching, did not see by what roguery of movement or illusion the man in the green turban avoided the terrible disemboweling thrust. But the keen blade whickered between side and lifted arm, and to Yasmina it seemed that Khemsa merely brushed his open palm lightly against Conan's bull-neck. But the Cimmerian went down like a slain ox.

Yet Conan was not dead; breaking his fall with his left hand, he slashed at Khemsa's legs even as he went down, and the Rakhsha avoided the scythe-like swipe only by a most unwizardly bound backward. Then Yasmina cried out sharply as she saw a woman she recognized as Gitara glide out from among

the rocks and come up to the man. The greeting died in the Devi's throat as she saw the malevolence in the girl's beautiful face.

Conan was rising slowly, shaken and dazed by the cruel craft of that blow which, delivered with an art forgotten of men before Atlantis sank, would have broken like a rotten twig the neck of a lesser man. Khemsa gazed at him cautiously and a trifle uncertainly. The Rakhsha had learned the full flood of his own power when he faced at bay the knives of the maddened Wazulis in the ravine behind Khurum village; but the Cimmerian's resistance had perhaps shaken his new-found confidence a trifle. Sorcery thrives on success, not on failure.

He stepped forward, lifting his hand —then halted as if frozen, head tilted back, eyes wide open, hand raised. In spite of himself Conan followed his gaze, and so did the women—the girl cowering by the trembling stallion, and the girl beside Khemsa.

Down the mountain-slopes, like a whirl of shining dust blown before the wind, a crimson, conoid cloud came dancing. Khemsa's dark face turned ashen; his hand began to tremble, then sank to his side. The girl beside him, sensing the change in him, stared at him inquiringly.

The crimson shape left the mountain-slope and came down in a long arching swoop. It struck the ledge between Conan and Khemsa, and the Rakhsha gave back with a stifled cry. He backed away, pushing the girl Gitara back with groping, fending hands.

The crimson cloud balanced like a spinning top for an instant, whirling in a dazzling sheen on its point. Then without warning it was gone, vanished as a bubble vanishes when burst. There on the ledge stood four men. It was miraculous, incredible, impossible, yet it was true. They were not ghosts or phantoms. They were four tall men, with shaven, vulture-like heads, and black robes that hid their feet. Their hands were concealed by their wide sleeves. They stood in silence, their naked heads nodding slightly in unison. They were facing Khemsa, but behind them Conan felt his own blood turning to ice in his veins. Rising, he backed stealthily away, until he felt the stallion's shoulder trembling against his back, and the Devi crept into the shelter of his arm. There was no word spoken. Silence hung like a stifling pall.

All four of the men in black robes stared at Khemsa. Their vulture-like faces were immobile, their eyes introspective and contemplative. But Khemsa shook like a man in an ague. His feet were braced on the rock, his calves straining as if in physical combat. Sweat ran in streams down his dark face. His right hand locked on something under his brown robe so desperately that the blood ebbed from that hand and left it white. His left hand fell on the shoulder of Gitara and clutched in agony like the grasp of a drowning man. She did not flinch or whimper, though his fingers dug like talons into her firm flesh.

Conan had witnessed hundreds of battles in his wild life, but never one like this, wherein four diabolical wills sought to beat down one lesser but equally devilish will that opposed them. But he only faintly sensed the monstrous quality of that hideous struggle. With his back to the wall, driven to bay by his former masters, Khemsa was fighting for his life with all the dark power, all the frightful knowledge they had taught him through long, grim years of neophytism and vassalage.

He was stronger than even he had guessed, and the free exercise of his powers in his own behalf had tapped unsus-

pected reservoirs of forces. And he was nerved to super-energy by frantic fear and desperation. He reeled before the merciless impact of those hypnotic eyes, but he held his ground. His features were distorted into a bestial grin of agony, and his limbs were twisted as in a rack. It was a war of souls, of frightful brains steeped in lore forbidden to men for a million years, of mentalities which had plumbed the abysses and explored the dark stars where spawn the shadows.

Yasmina understood this better than did Conan. And she dimly understood why Khemsa could withstand the concentrated impact of those four hellish wills which might have blasted into atoms the very rock on which he stood. The reason was the girl that he clutched with the strength of his despair. She was like an anchor to his staggering soul, battered by the waves of those psychic emanations. His weakness was now his strength. His love for the girl, violent and evil though it might be, was yet a tie that bound him to the rest of humanity, providing an earthly leverage for his will, a chain that his inhuman enemies could not break; at least not break through Khemsa.

They realized that before he did. And one of them turned his gaze from the Rakhsha full upon Gitara. There was no battle there. The girl shrank and wilted like a leaf in the drouth. Irresistibly impelled, she tore herself from her lover's arms before he realized what was happening. Then a hideous thing came to pass. She began to back toward the precipice, facing her tormenters, her eyes wide and blank as dark gleaming glass from behind which a lamp has been blown out. Khemsa groaned and staggered toward her, falling into the trap set for him. A divided mind could not maintain the unequal battle. He was beaten, a straw in their hands. The girl went backward, walking like an automaton, and Khemsa reeled drunkenly after her, hands vainly outstretched, groaning, slobbering in his pain, his feet moving heavily like dead things.

On the very brink she paused, standing stiffly, her heels on the edge, and he fell on his knees and crawled whimpering toward her, groping for her, to drag her back from destruction. And just before his clumsy fingers touched her, one of the wizards laughed, like the sudden, bronze note of a bell in hell. The girl reeled suddenly and, consummate climax of exquisite cruelty, reason and understanding flooded back into her eyes, which flared with awful fear. She screamed, clutched wildly at her lover's straining hands, and then, unable to save herself, fell headlong with a moaning cry.

Khemsa hauled himself to the edge and stared over, haggardly, his lips working as he mumbled to himself. Then he turned and stared for a long minute at his torturers, with wide eyes that held no human light. And then with a cry that almost burst the rocks, he reeled up and came rushing toward them, a knife lifted in his hand.

One of the Rakhshas stepped forward and stamped his foot, and as he stamped, there came a rumbling that grew swiftly to a grinding roar. Where his foot struck, a crevice opened in the solid rock that widened instantly. Then, with a deafening crash, a whole section of the ledge gave way. There was a last glimpse of Khemsa, with arms wildly upflung, and then he vanished amidst the roar of the avalanche that thundered down into the abyss.

The four looked contemplatively at the ragged edge of rock that formed the new rim of the precipice, and then turned sud-

denly. Conan, thrown off his feet by the shudder of the mountain, was rising, lifting Yasmina. He seemed to move as slowly as his brain was working. He was befogged and stupid. He realized that there was desperate need for him to lift the Devi on the black stallion, and ride like the wind, but an unaccountable sluggishness weighted his every thought and action.

And now the wizards had turned toward him; they raised their arms, and to his horrified sight, he saw their outlines fading, dimming, becoming hazy and nebulous, as a crimson smoke billowed around their feet and rose about them. They were blotted out by a sudden whirling cloud—and then he realized that he too was enveloped in a blinding crimson mist—he heard Yasmina scream, and the stallion cried out like a woman in pain. The Devi was torn from his arm, and as he lashed out with his knife blindly, a terrific blow like a gust of storm wind knocked him sprawling against a rock. Dazedly he saw a crimson conoid cloud spinning up and over the mountain slopes. Yasmina was gone, and so were the four men in black. Only the terrified stallion shared the ledge with him.

7. *On to Yimsha*

As MISTS vanish before a strong wind, the cobwebs vanished from Conan's brain. With a searing curse he leaped into the saddle and the stallion reared neighing beneath him. He glared up the slopes, hesitated, and then turned down the trail in the direction he had been going when halted by Khemsa's trickery. But now he did not ride at a measured gait. He shook loose the reins and the stallion went like a thunderbolt, as if frantic to lose hysteria in violent physical exertion. Across the ledge and around the crag and down the narrow trail threading the great steep they plunged at breakneck speed. The path followed a fold of rock, winding interminably down from tier to tier of striated escarpment, and once, far below, Conan got a glimpse of the ruin that had fallen— a mighty pile of broken stone and boulders at the foot of a gigantic cliff.

The valley floor was still far below him when he reached a long and lofty ridge that led out from the slope like a natural causeway. Out upon this he rode, with an almost sheer drop on either hand. He could trace ahead of him the trail he had to follow; far ahead it dropped down from the ridge and made a great horseshoe back into the river bed at his left hand. He cursed the necessity of traversing those miles, but it was the only way. To try to descend to the lower lap of the trail here would be to attempt the impossible. Only a bird could get to the riverbed with a whole neck.

So he urged on the wearying stallion, until a clink of hoofs reached his ears, welling up from below. Pulling up short and reining to the lip of the cliff, he stared down into the dry river-bed that wound along the foot of the ridge. Along that gorge rode a motley throng—bearded men on half-wild horses, five hundred strong, bristling with weapons. And Conan shouted suddenly, leaning over the edge of the cliff, three hundred feet above them.

At his shout they reined back, and five hundred bearded faces were tilted up toward him; a deep, clamorous roar filled the canyon. Conan did not waste words.

"I was riding for Ghor!" he roared. "I had not hoped to meet you dogs on the trail. Follow me as fast as your nags can push! I'm going to Yimsha, and——"

"Traitor!" The howl was like a dash of ice-water in his face.

"What?" He glared down at them,

jolted speechless. He saw wild eyes blazing up at him, faces contorted with fury, fists brandishing blades.

"Traitor!" they roared back, wholeheartedly. "Where are the seven chiefs held captive in Peshkhauri?"

"Why, in the governor's prison, I suppose," he answered.

A bloodthirsty yell from a hundred throats answered him, with such a waving of weapons and a clamor that he could not understand what they were saying. He beat down the din with a bull-like roar, and bellowed: "What devil's play is this? Let one of you speak, so I can understand what you mean!"

A gaunt old chief elected himself to this position, shook his tulwar at Conan as a preamble, and shouted accusingly: "You would not let us go raiding Peshkhauri to rescue our brothers!"

"No, you fools!" roared the exasperated Cimmerian. "Even if you'd breached the wall, which is unlikely, they'd have hanged the prisoners before you could reach them."

"And you went alone to traffic with the governor!" yelled the Afghuli, working himself into a frothing frenzy.

"Well?"

"Where are the seven chiefs?" howled the old chief, making his tulwar into a glimmering wheel of steel about his head. "Where are they? Dead!"

"What!" Conan nearly fell off his horse in his surprize.

"Aye, dead!" five hundred bloodthirsty voices assured him.

The old chief brandished his arms and got the floor again. "They were not hanged!" he screeched. "A Wazuli in another cell saw them die! The governor sent a wizard to slay them by craft!"

"That must be a lie," said Conan. "The governor would not dare. Last night I talked with him——"

The admission was unfortunate. A yell of hate and accusation split the skies.

"Aye! You went to him alone! To betray us! It is no lie. The Wazuli escaped through the doors the wizard burst in his entry, and told the tale to our scouts whom he met in the Zhaibar. They had been sent forth to search for you, when you did not return. When they heard the Wazuli's tale, they returned with all haste to Ghor, and we saddled our steeds and girt our swords!"

"And what do you fools mean to do?" demanded the Cimmerian.

"To avenge our brothers!" they howled. "Death to the Kshatriyas! Slay him, brothers, he is a traitor!"

Arrows began to rattle around him. Conan rose in his stirrups, striving to make himself heard above the tumult, and then, with a roar of mingled rage, defiance and disgust, he wheeled and galloped back up the trail. Behind him and below him the Afghulis came pelting, mouthing their rage, too furious even to remember that the only way they could reach the height whereon he rode was to traverse the river-bed in the other direction, make the broad bend and follow the twisting trail up over the ridge. When they did remember this, and turned back, their repudiated chief had almost reached the point where the ridge joined the escarpment.

At the cliff he did not take the trail by which he had descended, but turned off on another, a mere trace along a rock-fault, where the stallion scrambled for footing. He had not ridden far when the stallion snorted and shied back from something lying in the trail. Conan stared down on the travesty of a man, a broken, shredded, bloody heap that gibbered and gnashed splintered teeth.

Only the dark gods that rule over the grim destinies of wizards know how

Khemsa dragged his shattered body from beneath that awful cairn of fallen rocks and up the steep slope to the trail.

IMPELLED by some obscure reason, Conan dismounted and stood looking down at the ghastly shape, knowing that he was witness of a thing miraculous and opposed to nature. The Rakhsha lifted his gory head, and his strange eyes, glazed with agony and approaching death, rested on Conan with recognition.

"Where are they?" It was a racking croak not even remotely resembling a human voice.

"Gone back to their damnable castle on Yimsha," grunted Conan. "They took the Devi with them."

"I will go!" muttered the man. "I will follow them! They killed Gitara; I will kill them—the acolytes, the Four of the Black Circle, the Master himself! Kill—kill them all!" He strove to drag his mutilated frame along the rock, but not even his indomitable will could animate that gory mass longer, where the splintered bones hung together only by torn tissue and ruptured fiber.

"Follow them!" raved Khemsa, drooling a bloody slaver. "Follow!"

"I'm going to," growled Conan. "I went to fetch my Afghulis, but they've turned on me. I'm going on to Yimsha alone. I'll have the Devi back if I have to tear down that damned mountain with my bare hands. I didn't think the governor would dare kill my headmen, when I had the Devi, but it seems he did. I'll have his head for that. She's no use to me now as a hostage, but——"

"The curse of Yizil on them!" gasped Khemsa. "Go! I am dying. Wait—take my girdle."

He tried to fumble with a mangled hand at his tatters, and Conan, understanding what he sought to convey, bent and drew from about his gory waist a girdle of curious aspect.

"Follow the golden vein through the abyss," muttered Khemsa. "Wear the girdle. I had it from a Stygian priest. It will aid you, though it failed me at last. Break the crystal globe with the four golden pomegranates. Beware of the Master's transmutations—I am going to Gitara—she is waiting for me in hell —*aie, ya Skelos yar!*" And so he died.

Conan stared down at the girdle. The hair of which it was woven was not horsehair. He was convinced that it was woven of the thick black tresses of a woman. Set in the thick mesh were tiny jewels such as he had never seen before. The buckle was strangely made, in the form of a golden serpent head, flat, wedge-shaped and scaled with curious art. A strong shudder shook Conan as he handled it, and he turned as though to cast it over the precipice; then he hesitated, and finally buckled it about his waist, under the Bakhariot girdle. Then he mounted and pushed on.

The sun had sunk behind the crags. He climbed the trail in the vast shadow of the cliffs that was thrown out like a dark blue mantle over valleys and ridges far below. He was not far from the crest when, edging around the shoulder of a jutting crag, he heard the clink of shod hoofs ahead of him. He did not turn back. Indeed, so narrow was the path that the stallion could not have wheeled his great body upon it. He rounded the jut of the rock and came upon a portion of the path that broadened somewhat. A chorus of threatening yells broke on his ear, but his stallion pinned a terrified horse hard against the rock, and Conan caught the arm of the rider in an iron grip, checking the lifted sword in midair.

"Kerim Shah!" muttered Conan, red glints smoldering luridly in his eyes. The

Turanian did not struggle; they sat their horses almost breast to breast, Conan's fingers locking the other's sword-arm. Behind Kerim Shah filed a group of lean Irakzai on gaunt horses. They glared like wolves, fingering bows and knives, but rendered uncertain because of the narrowness of the path and the perilous proximity of the abyss that yawned beneath them.

"Where is the Devi?" demanded Kerim Shah.

"What's it to you, you Hyrkanian spy?" snarled Conan.

"I know you have her," answered Kerim Shah. "I was on my way northward with some tribesmen when we were ambushed by enemies in Shalizah Pass. Many of my men were slain, and the rest of us harried through the hills like jackals. When we had beaten off our pursuers, we turned westward, toward Amir Jehun Pass, and this morning we came upon a Wazuli wandering through the hills. He was quite mad, but I learned much from his incoherent gibberings before he died. I learned that he was the sole survivor of a band which followed a chief of the Afghulis and a captive Kshatriya woman into a gorge behind Khurum village. He babbled much of a man in a green turban whom the Afghuli rode down, but who, when attacked by the Wazulis who pursued, smote them with a nameless doom that wiped them out as a gust of wind-driven fire wipes out a cluster of locusts.

"How that one man escaped, I do not know, nor did he; but I knew from his maunderings that Conan of Ghor had been in Khurum with his royal captive. And as we made our way through the hills, we overtook a naked Galzai girl bearing a gourd of water, who told us a tale of having been stripped and ravished by a giant foreigner in the garb of an Afghuli chief, who, she said, gave her garments to a Vendhyan woman who accompanied him. She said you rode westward."

KERIM SHAH did not consider it necessary to explain that he had been on his way to keep his rendezvous with the expected troops from Secunderam when he found his way barred by hostile tribesmen. The road to Gurashah valley through Shalizah Pass was longer than the road that wound through Amir Jehun Pass, but the latter traversed part of the Afghuli country, which Kerim Shah had been anxious to avoid until he came with an army. Barred from the Shalizah road, however, he had turned to the forbidden route, until news that Conan had not yet reached Afghulistan with his captive had caused him to turn southward and push on recklessly in the hope of overtaking the Cimmerian in the hills.

"So you had better tell me where the Devi is," suggested Kerim Shah. "We outnumber you——"

"Let one of your dogs nock a shaft and I'll throw you over the cliff," Conan promised. "It wouldn't do you any good to kill me, anyhow. Five hundred Afghulis are on my trail, and if they find you've cheated them, they'll flay you alive. Anyway, I haven't got the Devi. She's in the hands of the Black Seers of Yimsha."

"Tarim!" swore Kerim Shah softly, shaken out of his poise for the first time. "Khemsa——"

"Khemsa's dead," grunted Conan. "His masters sent him to hell on a landslide. And now get out of my way. I'd be glad to kill you if I had the time, but I'm on my way to Yimsha."

"I'll go with you," said the Turanian abruptly.

Conan laughed at him. "Do you think I'd trust you, you Hyrkanian dog?"

"I don't ask you to," returned Kerim Shah. "We both want the Devi. You know my reason; King Yezdigerd desires to add her kingdom to his empire, and herself in his seraglio. And I knew you, in the days when you were a hetman of the *kozak* steppes; so I know your ambition is wholesale plunder. You want to loot Vendhya, and to twist out a huge ransom for Yasmina. Well, let us for the time being, without any illusion about each other, unite our forces, and try to rescue the Devi from the Seers. If we succeed, and live, we can fight it out to see who keeps her."

Conan narrowly scrutinized the other for a moment, and then nodded, releasing the Turanian's arm. "Agreed; what about your men?"

Kerim Shah turned to the silent Irakzai and spoke briefly: "This chief and I are going to Yimsha to fight the wizards. Will you go with us, or stay here to be flayed by the Afghulis who are following this man?"

They looked at him with eyes grimly fatalistic. They were doomed and they knew it—had known it ever since the singing arrows of the ambushed Dagozai had driven them back from the pass of Shalizah. The men of the lower Zhaibar had too many reeking blood-feuds among the crag-dwellers. They were too small a band to fight their way back through the hills to the villages of the border, without the guidance of the crafty Turanian. They counted themselves as dead already, so they made the reply that only dead men would make: "We will go with thee and die on Yimsha."

"Then in Crom's name let us be gone," grunted Conan, fidgeting with impatience as he stared into the blue gulfs of the deepening twilight. "My wolves were hours behind me, but we've lost a devilish lot of time."

Kerim Shah backed his steed from between the black stallion and the cliff, sheathed his sword and cautiously turned the horse. Presently the band was filing up the path as swiftly as they dared. They came out upon the crest nearly a mile east of the spot where Khemsa had halted the Cimmerian and the Devi. The path they had traversed was a perilous one, even for hillmen, and for that reason Conan had avoided it that day when carrying Yasmina, though Kerim Shah, following him, had taken it supposing the Cimmerian had done likewise. Even Conan sighed with relief when the horses scrambled up over the last rim. They moved like phantom riders through an enchanted realm of shadows. The soft creak of leather, the clink of steel marked their passing, then again the dark mountain slopes lay naked and silent in the starlight.

8. *Yasmina Knows Stark Terror*

YASMINA had time but for one scream when she felt herself enveloped in that crimson whirl and torn from her protector with appalling force. She screamed once, and then she had no breath to scream. She was blinded, deafened, rendered mute and eventually senseless by the terrific rushing of the air about her. There was a dazed consciousness of dizzy height and numbing speed, a confused impression of natural sensations gone mad, and then vertigo and oblivion.

A vestige of these sensations clung to her as she recovered consciousness; so she cried out and clutched wildly as though to stay a headlong and involuntary flight. Her fingers closed on soft fabric, and a relieving sense of stability pervaded her. She took cognizance of her surroundings.

She was lying on a dais covered with black velvet. This dais stood in a great, dim

room whose walls were hung with dusky tapestries across which crawled dragons reproduced with repellent realism. Floating shadows merely hinted at the lofty ceiling, and gloom that lent itself to illusion lurked in the corners. There seemed to be neither windows nor doors in the walls, or else they were concealed by the nighted tapestries. Where the dim light came from, Yasmina could not determine. The great room was a realm of mysteries, of shadows, and shadowy shapes in which she could not have sworn to observe movement, yet which invaded her mind with a dim and formless terror.

But her gaze fixed itself on a tangible object. On another, smaller dais of jet, a few feet away, a man sat cross-legged, gazing contemplatively at her. His long black velvet robe, embroidered with gold thread, fell loosely about him, masking his figure. His hands were folded in his sleeves. There was a velvet cap upon his head. His face was calm, placid, not unhandsome, his eyes lambent and slightly oblique. He did not move a muscle as he sat regarding her, nor did his expression alter when he saw she was conscious.

Yasmina felt fear crawl like a trickle of ice-water down her supple spine. She lifted herself on her elbows and stared apprehensively at the stranger.

"Who are you?" she demanded. Her voice sounded brittle and inadequate.

"I am the Master of Yimsha." The tone was rich and resonant, like the mellow notes of a temple bell.

"Why did you bring me here?" she demanded.

"Were you not seeking me?"

"If you are one of the Black Seers—yes!" she answered recklessly, believing that he could read her thoughts anyway.

He laughed softly, and chills crawled up and down her spine again.

"You would turn the wild children of the hills against the Seers of Yimsha!" he smiled. "I have read it in your mind, princess. Your weak, human mind, filled with petty dreams of hate and revenge."

"You slew my brother!" A rising tide of anger was vying with her fear; her hands were clenched, her lithe body rigid. "Why did you persecute him? He never harmed you. The priests say the Seers are above meddling in human affairs. Why did you destroy the king of Vendhya?"

"How can an ordinary human understand the motives of a Seer?" returned the Master calmly. "My acolytes in the temples of Turan, who are the priests behind the priests of Tarim, urged me to bestir myself in behalf of Yezdigerd. For reasons of my own, I complied. How can I explain my mystic reasons to your puny intellect? You could not understand."

"I understand this: that my brother died!" Tears of grief and rage shook in her voice. She rose upon her knees and stared at him with wide blazing eyes, as supple and dangerous in that moment as a she-panther.

"As Yezdigerd desired," agreed the Master calmly. "For a while it was my whim to further his ambitions."

"Is Yezdigerd your vassal?" Yasmina tried to keep the timbre of her voice unaltered. She had felt her knee pressing something hard and symmetrical under a fold of velvet. Subtly she shifted her position, moving her hand under the fold.

"Is the dog that licks up the offal in the temple yard the vassal of the god?" returned the Master.

He did not seem to notice the actions she sought to dissemble. Concealed by the velvet, her fingers closed on what she knew was the golden hilt of a dagger. She bent her head to hide the light of triumph in her eyes.

"I am weary of Yezdigerd," said the

Master. "I have turned to other amusements—ha!"

With a fierce cry Yasmina sprang like a jungle cat, stabbing murderously. Then she stumbled and slid to the floor, where she cowered, staring up at the man on the dais. He had not moved; his cryptic smile was unchanged. Tremblingly she lifted her hand and stared at it with dilated eyes. There was no dagger in her fingers; they grasped a stalk of golden lotus, the crushed blossoms drooping on the bruised stem.

She dropped it as if it had been a viper, and scrambled away from the proximity of her tormenter. She returned to her own dais, because that was at least more dignified for a queen than groveling on the floor at the feet of a sorcerer, and eyed him apprehensively, expecting reprisals.

But the Master made no move.

"All substance is one to him who holds the key of the cosmos," he said cryptically. "To an adept nothing is immutable. At will, steel blossoms bloom in unnamed gardens, or flower-swords flash in the moonlight."

"You are a devil," she sobbed.

"Not I!" he laughed. "I was born on this planet, long ago. Once I was a common man, nor have I lost all human attributes in the numberless eons of my adeptship. A human steeped in the dark arts is greater than a devil. I am of human origin, but I rule demons. You have seen the Lords of the Black Circle—it would blast your soul to hear from what far realm I summoned them and from what doom I guard them with ensorceled crystal and golden serpents.

"But only I can rule them. My foolish Khemsa thought to make himself great—poor fool, bursting material doors and hurtling himself and his mistress through the air from hill to hill! Yet if he had not been destroyed his power might have grown to rival mine."

He laughed again. "And you, poor, silly thing! Plotting to send a hairy hill chief to storm Yimsha! It was such a jest that I myself could have designed, had it occurred to me, that you should fall in his hands. And I read in your childish mind an intention to seduce by your feminine wiles to attempt your purpose, anyway.

"But for all your stupidity, you are a woman fair to look upon. It is my whim to keep you for my slave."

The daughter of a thousand proud emperors gasped with shame and fury at the word.

"You dare not!"

His mocking laughter cut her like a whip across her naked shoulders.

"The king dares not trample a worm in the road? Little fool, do you not realize that your royal pride is no more to me than a straw blown on the wind? I, who have known the kisses of the queens of Hell! You have seen how I deal with a rebel!"

Cowed and awed, the girl crouched on the velvet-covered dais. The light grew dimmer and more phantom-like. The features of the Master became shadowy. His voice took on a newer tone of command.

"I will never yield to you!" Her voice trembled with fear but it carried a ring of resolution.

"You will yield," he answered with horrible conviction. "Fear and pain shall teach you. I will lash you with horror and agony to the last quivering ounce of your endurance, until you become as melted wax to be bent and molded in my hands as I desire. You shall know such discipline as no mortal woman ever knew, until my slightest command is to you as

the unalterable will of the gods. And first, to humble your pride, you shall travel back through the lost ages, and view all the shapes that have been you. *Aie, yil la khosa!*"

At these words the shadowy room swam before Yasmina's affrighted gaze. The roots of her hair prickled her scalp, and her tongue clove to her palate. Somewhere a gong sounded a deep, ominous note. The dragons on the tapestries glowed like blue fire, and then faded out. The Master on his dais was but a shapeless shadow. The dim light gave way to soft, thick darkness, almost tangible, that pulsed with strange radiations. She could no longer see the Master. She could see nothing. She had a strange sensation that the walls and ceiling had withdrawn immensely from her.

Then somewhere in the darkness a glow began, like a firefly that rhythmically dimmed and quickened. It grew to a golden ball, and as it expanded its light grew more intense, flaming whitely. It burst suddenly, showering the darkness with white sparks that did not illumine the shadows. But like an impression left in the gloom, a faint luminance remained, and revealed a slender dusky shaft shooting up from the shadowy floor. Under the girl's dilated gaze it spread, took shape; stems and broad leaves appeared, and great black poisonous blossoms that towered above her as she cringed against the velvet. A subtle perfume pervaded the atmosphere. It was the dread figure of the black lotus that had grown up as she watched, as it grows in the haunted, forbidden jungles of Khitai.

The broad leaves were murmurous with evil life. The blossoms bent toward her like sentient things, nodding serpent-like on pliant stems. Etched against soft, impenetrable darkness it loomed over her, gigantic, blackly visible in some mad way. Her brain reeled with the drugging scent and she sought to crawl from the dais. Then she clung to it as it seemed to be pitching at an impossible slant. She cried out with terror and clung to the velvet, but she felt her fingers ruthlessly torn away. There was a sensation as of all sanity and stability crumbling and vanishing. She was a quivering atom of sentiency driven through a black, roaring, icy void by a thundering wind that threatened to extinguish her feeble flicker of animate life like a candle blown out in a storm.

Then there came a period of blind impulse and movement, when the atom that was she mingled and merged with myriad other atoms of spawning life in the yeasty morass of existence, molded by formative forces until she emerged again a conscious individual, whirling down an endless spiral of lives.

In a mist of terror she relived all her former existences, recognized and *was* again all the bodies that had carried her ego throughout the changing ages. She bruised her feet again over the long, weary road of life that stretched out behind her into the immemorial Past. Back beyond the dimmest dawns of Time she crouched shuddering in primordial jungles, hunted by slavering beasts of prey. Skin-clad, she waded thigh-deep in rice-swamps, battling with squawking waterfowl for the precious grains. She labored with the oxen to drag the pointed stick through the stubborn soil, and she crouched endlessly over looms in peasant huts.

She saw walled cities burst into flame, and fled screaming before the slayers. She reeled naked and bleeding over burning sands, dragged at the slaver's stirrup, and she knew the grip of hot, fierce hands on her writhing flesh, the shame and agony of brutal lust. She screamed under

the bite of the lash, and moaned on the rack; mad with terror she fought against the hands that forced her head inexorably down on the bloody block.

She knew the agonies of childbirth, and the bitterness of love betrayed. She suffered all the woes and wrongs and brutalities that man has inflicted on woman throughout the eons; and she endured all the spite and malice of woman for woman. And like the flick of a fiery whip throughout was the consciousness she retained of her Devi-ship. She was all the women she had ever been, yet in her knowing she was Yasmina. This consciousness was not lost in the throes of reincarnation. At one and the same time she was a naked slave-wench groveling under the whip, and the proud Devi of Vendhya. And she suffered not only as the slave-girl suffered, but as Yasmina, to whose pride the whip was like a white-hot brand.

Life merged into life in flying chaos, each with its burden of wo and shame and agony, until she dimly heard her own voice screaming unbearably, like one long-drawn cry of suffering echoing down the ages.

Then she awakened on the velvet-covered dais in the mystic room.

In a ghostly gray light she saw again the dais and the cryptic robed figure seated upon it. The hooded head was bent, the high shoulders faintly etched against the uncertain dimness. She could make out no details clearly, but the hood, where the velvet cap had been, stirred a formless uneasiness in her. As she stared, there stole over her a nameless fear that froze her tongue to her palate—a feeling that it was not the Master who sat so silently on that black dais.

Then the figure moved and rose upright, towering above her. It stooped over her and the long arms in their wide black sleeves bent about her. She fought against them in speechless fright, surprized by their lean hardness. The hooded head bent down toward her averted face. And she screamed, and screamed again in poignant fear and loathing. Bony arms gripped her lithe body, and from that hood looked forth a countenance of death and decay—features like rotting parchment on a moldering skull.

She screamed again, and then, as those champing, grinning jaws bent toward her lips, she lost consciousness. . . .

The amazing and utterly fascinating events that bring this story to its end will be narrated in next month's WEIRD TALES. Reserve your copy now at your magazine dealer's.

At the Bend of the Trail

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN

A brief story of Africa and a weird vegetable monstrosity that fought two white explorers in the jungle

THEY stood at the bend of the trail, young Bruce Armstrong and white-haired Hubert Whaley, conversing while their black bearers raised their tent and built a cooking-fire. The sun was low on the African horizon and they whiled away the minutes before supper by conversation.

"As I was saying," Whaley told his young friend, "the natives invest every unusual object—rock, hill or what-not—with a supernatural personality and give it a wide berth. Look at this sharp curve in the trail. For years they've been dodging out to one side, just to avoid that root."

He pointed to a strange growth in the lush grass. It was long and crooked, lying in the shape of a letter S. If straight it might have been ten feet long, and it tapered from the size of a man's ankle at the point where it sprouted from the ground to a whiplash tip. It might have been the root of a tree, but there was no stem within yards to which it might attach.

"Rum thing. Looks as if a tree must be growing upside down," commented Armstrong. "Branches in the ground, root in the air, what? A chap could write books and books about uncatalogued plants in these parts. And you say the boys won't touch it?"

"Not one of them," replied Whaley. "Can't say that I blame them. It looks uncanny enough."

"What utter rot!" cried the younger man. "Come now, Whaley, do you mean to say you give a minute's serious thought to their superstitions?"

"I mean to say that Africa's full of strange beings and doings," was Whaley's sober response. "When you've been here as long as I have——"

"I'm turning missionary this moment," cut in Armstrong. "I don't begrudge the blacks their ideas, but when a good friend and Englishman gets a touch of their religion I have to do something about it.—Hi, you Johnnies!" he cried to the bearers on the other side of the curved trail. "Tumble over here. Tell 'em, Whaley, I don't speak their lingo yet."

At Whaley's call a score of plum-colored men gathered, eyeing the whites with respectful interest.

"Look here, you chaps," said Armstrong. "What's all this about roots and spirits and such like? It's a lot of foolishness, you know.—Pass that on to 'em, Whaley, will you?"

When Whaley had translated, the headman replied that their tribal beliefs had been taught them by wise old men, who must have known the truth.

"Rot!" cried Armstrong when Whaley had rendered this into English. "Rot, I say, and I'll prove it. You're afraid to touch this root, are you?" He stepped close and set his boot-heel on the growth. "Well, then, suppose I show you that it's perfectly harmless."

A cry of alarm went up from the bearers—a cry echoed by Whaley.

"Look out, Armstrong! Look out, man, it's moving!"

The free tip of the root was swaying to and fro, like the head of a blindworm. Even as Armstrong stared in chilled amazement it writhed up from the ground and curled back toward his foot. With a startled exclamation he jumped away. The root-tip sank quickly down and lay motionless again.

Whaley and Armstrong looked at each other, at the root, and at the retreating bearers.

"I call it odd," said Armstrong after a moment, in a voice that quivered ever so slightly. "Something to tell about back home, what?"

"Best leave it alone, old man," counseled Whaley. "Suppose we see what's for supper."

THEY ate in the gathering gloom, ate silently. In silence they smoked their pipes. The usual singing and laughing of the bearers were subdued also. Whaley noticed Armstrong's nervous fidgeting, wondered what to say, and said nothing. A dry rustle in the grass attracted their attention.

"What's that?" demanded Armstrong sharply. "A snake?"

"Let's have a look-see," suggested Whaley, taking the lantern from the tent-pole. "Dashed unpleasant things, snakes. Bring along the gun—it might be a big one."

But they found no snake, and the bearers, called to help look, said that there were few snakes in this part of the country. Finally the two whites returned to the fire to resume their smoking. Armstrong muttered, twitched and finally broke the silence.

"It's all nonsense, and I say it once for all."

"What's all nonsense? What do you mean?" asked Whaley, though he knew well enough.

"This beastly root business. It gets on my nerves. I can't forget it. When it writhed under my foot—ugh! My flesh crept."

"Don't try to worry it out," Whaley said. "You'll only go batty trying to explain it."

At that Armstrong jumped up, reached into the tool-box just inside the tent and grabbed a hand-ax. With this he strode away toward the trail.

"Don't be a silly ass, man," called Whaley, following him. "What are you going to do?"

"Going to cut that root out," flung back Armstrong. "I've bothered about it quite enough. I shan't sleep tonight, not while the thing's there."

"It's just on your nerves, Armstrong," said Whaley. "I tell you, it's nothing. Just a funny-looking plant that rustled when you kicked it.—Hm! What's this?"

They had come into the bend of the trail. The last rays of light showed them that there was no root there, no growing thing larger than a blade of grass, not even a hole to show where it might have been. The ax drooped in Armstrong's hand. The two stared at each other as the night rode down.

"Wood's scarce hereabouts," said Whaley in a low voice. "Perhaps the boys cut it up and used it for a fire."

Armstrong shook his head. "No, Whaley. You said yourself, and so did they, that it was a thing not to be touched."

THEY walked back to their camp. The brightness of the lantern shed a little comfort on them as they again sat in silence. "Bed?" suggested Whaley at last, and they entered the tent. "Now, forget——"

"You're a topping fellow, Whaley, but I don't need babying," said Arm-

strong, sitting on his cot to pull off his boots.

"Of course not. Go to sleep now, there's a good chap, and don't dream of roots."

"Dash it all, who's going to dream about 'em?" said Armstrong as they put out the light and lay down.

Silence yet again, and after a minute or two Whaley could hear Armstrong's deep, regular breathing. The young man was asleep, probably had dismissed the queer adventure of the evening as a trifle. But Whaley, as he himself had said, had lived too long in Africa to banish all strange things so lightly from his mind. He pondered long before he, too, dozed off.

He woke suddenly with a wild shriek splitting his ears, the shriek of a man in mortal terror. He sprang out of bed, shaking the sleep from his eyes. Moonbeams came through the half-opened flaps, showing Armstrong struggling on the ground between the cots. He was fighting somebody or something—Whaley could not see his antagonist. The older man dropped to his knees, reaching out to help. His hands fell on a quivering band that circled Armstrong's chest. He recoiled from it with a cry. He had touched wood, wood that moved and lived like flesh!

"Whaley — the thing — it's choking me!" gasped Armstrong in a rattling voice. "It has a spirit—it's after revenge——"

He writhed along the ground and half out of the tent, then collapsed. In the light from the moon Whaley saw a sight that stirred his white hair. A writhing, cable-like thing was grappling with Armstrong. It had wound twice around his body and arms, and the two loose ends were lashing to and fro like flails.

Whaley flung himself forward again. One of the flailing ends fell on his head, knocking him back into the tent. He went sprawling, half stunned and almost out of the fight. His hand fell into the open tool-box. A single grab found the handle of the ax that Armstrong had picked up earlier in the evening. The feel of the weapon seemed to restore Whaley's strength. Once more he charged into the battle.

Armstrong barely quivered now. Only the nameless attacker moved. Whaley put out his hand and clutched the larger coil that crushed his friend's chest. Sinking his nails into the coarse, splintery skin that coated it, he dragged it a little free of its hold and struck with the ax. The blade sank deeply into the tough tissue. He wrenched the ax free, and the moonlight fell upon the gash, as white as fresh-cut pine.

The floundering coils churned with new, hostile energy, loosening their hold on the fallen Armstrong. Whaley dragged at them, and they leaped and twisted in his hand like a flooded fire-hose. The smaller end glided across the ground and whipped around Whaley's ankle, climbing it in a spiral. Another loop snapped on his wrist like a half-hitch, almost breaking it. He grunted at the crushing agony, but with a supreme effort, drew a length almost taut between arm and leg. With all the strength of his right arm he drove the ax. He felt the steel edge bite deep. The grip on wrist and ankle relaxed and he freed himself with a sudden struggle. The two sundered halves of the thing flopped and twisted on the ground, like the pieces of a gigantic severed worm.

Whaley's mind whirled and he yearned to let himself drop and swoon, but he lifted the ax and struck again and yet again. His chest panted, his brow streamed sweat, but he chopped

and chopped until only pulsating fragments lay around him. He dashed them all into the half-dead fire, which blazed quickly over this new food.

Then for the first time he realized that the native bearers were gathered, watching in frozen horror. He looked at them, then at the silent form of his partner. He knelt and passed his hands over the still body.

"Broken arm—three cracked ribs," he said aloud. "Not bad for an evil spirit." He called to the headman. "Build up the fire, heat water. Bring a bottle of brandy. You other boys, carry him into the tent. Lord, what a country!"

The White Prince

By RONAL KAYSER

A weird story of the World War, when the Serbian army stormed the Turkish castle of Marko—and a legendary Serb hero

IN THE first days of November, 1912, the Serbian army under General Mishitch gathered in a dark cloud at the foot of the Mount of Prilep. The Balkan sun streamed a cold, snowy light upon the mountainside and painted in somber grays and browns the rugged walls of the Castle of Marko. From the grim old fortress, Turkish siege-cannon and mitrailleuses frowned down the slope. The red Turkish flag with its insolent crescent and star gleamed defiantly overhead.

Away to the rear of the Serbs a cannon barked—a shrill whistle rent the air—and a fountain of smoke and dust spouted in front of the castle.

Chedo, the color-bearer, knelt in the front row of the waiting army, clutching the polished smooth staff of the battle flag in his curved, cold-stiffened fingers. He was a youth of twenty, with the blunt features, tawny complexion and flashing black eyes of his race. The grumble of the cannon curved a quick, fierce smile upon his lips. He looked, left and right, at the palely shining bayonets of his companions, and dark flames of hatred spurted in his eyes as he stared again up the naked brown slope.

Leaping to his feet, Chedo waved the red, blue and white barred flag furiously, and shook his fist at the Turks. A cheer went up around him. They were eager for the gamble with death, these men. But the blunt edge of a saber crossed Chedo's shoulder.

The youth whirled around. "Yes, sir!" he exclaimed, and saluted.

Captain Aganovitch's face showed a thin, angry line of white teeth.

"Down, you puppy!" he snarled. And then: "Remember, not a step until I give the order!"

A second roar and a third came from the rear. Chedo sank down upon his knees again. Over his shoulder he watched the officer pace back through the troops.

"They're going to knock the castle to pieces first, I guess," he said.

Next to him old Mourok, the *gouslar,* spat and muttered into his gray beard. "That's no way," he growled. "The Turks can't face bayonets—cold steel turns their blood to water!"

It was old Mourok who, squatted by the campfires at night, strummed the *gousle* and to its mournful strains chanted the heroic poems of the Serbs. He sang of the hero, the Prince Kraljevitch Marko, and the piebald horse, Sharatz, the gift of a woodland *veele.* Marko and Sharatz —a dragon seated upon a dragon! For no man could whip Marko in fair fight, as no horse could distance the piebald. Old Mourok sang of the exploits and many fights of the pair; and he sang, too, of how neither had ever died—but of how Prince Marko had crept away into a cave near this castle at Prilep and there slept, from year to year awakening to see whether his sword had yet come out of that rock into which he had plunged it to the very hilt. There Sharatz munched his portion of hay, which must now be nearly devoured; from there, the two would some day arise to drive the Turk for ever from Serbia's soil.

Chedo thought of these things, but there was no room for idle legends in Captain Aganovitch's head as the officer marched toward the rear of the lines. He listened instead to the full-throated roar of the Serbian cannon. They had bigger guns and more of them—it was only a question of holding the troops in check until the cannon had completed their task. Aganovitch knew that his men were frantic with hatred of their ancient foes, and intoxicated with recent victory. Under his breath he cursed that young fool, Chedo.

The men could so easily be incited to a premature, disorganized attack! And then —slaughter—defeat—disaster!

A wild yell from the front brought the captain spinning around. He saw the first dark lines sweeping up the hill like an angry wave sparkling with bayonet points.

Aganovitch broke into a run, his eyes glued on the advancing speck of color which was Chedo's flag. But now the whole regiment was swarming around him.

"Back!" he screamed. "Back! I command you!"

Deaf to his cries, the soldiers ran on like maddened wolves straight toward the castle. The captain whipped out his saber and began striking with the backside in every direction.

"Back! Down! Halt! You fools, you curs!"

It was no use trying to give orders. He ran after his men, shouting and pleading. "Come back! I beg you—it's certain death—you will be blown to bits!"

A thunder of field pieces from the castle drowned his words. Aganovitch felt the earth tremble as a great thrust of fire and smoke leaped from the hilltop. The Serbs darted on into that crackle of hellfire. The captain saw them fall by the dozens.

The hill had come all alive with racing brown figures, leaping over their comrades' dead bodies, running on, tumbling and falling. Captain Aganovitch squeezed shut his eyes to close out that field of horror. His blood ran cold, his hands trembled, and molten waves of despair seethed within his brainpan.

The Serb artillery had ceased firing in order not to butcher their own men. At the foot of the hill, clumps of dismayed and bewildered officers were gathering—then marching up the slope to die with their men.

Captain Aganovitch removed his pis-

tol from his holster and stepped woodenly toward the castle.

CHEDO led this wild and suicidal attack. Kneeling under the flag, looking back over his shoulder at the retiring officer, he heard a muffled cry burst from old Mourok's bearded lips. Turning his head, Chedo saw a thing passing belief on the hillside, slightly to his left, and outlined against the black, rugged rise of the ground.

It was like a mist, cloudy and insubstantial and diffuse, but unlike a mist in shining with a peculiar living luminescence. Straining his eyes, Chedo could make out a bulking figure enwrapped in the ethereal stuff.

He gasped; this was certainly no ordinary morning vapor. . . . Clutching the flag's staff, he struggled against a wave of superstitious terror. He jerked his eyes away to Mourok, who had flung himself upon his knees also.

"What——?"

"God knows!" And the old man crossed himself.

Chedo forced himself to look again at the apparition. Now the mist, swiftly dissolving, gave to his startled gaze the vision of a gigantic man seated upon a piebald horse. The horse struck his hoofs upon the earth, and glittering sparks leaped upward and the ground quaked. A livid blue flame played before the beast's nostrils. There was a jeweled saddle upon him, bound about his belly with seven belts.

"It is the end of the world!" some man in the ranks babbled.

The giant shifted slightly in the saddle, so that his great, black-bearded face looked squarely upon the Serbian army. It was a face full of power, and haughty as the face of a king might be. He wore a suit of armor that shone with the glint of precious gems; he had girt about his shoulders a loose cloak of purest white. His hair, falling free from under the casque, was long and thick as a woman's. He stared along the crouching line of the army until at last his eyes met Chedo's own, and there they dwelt; and it seemed to Chedo that the eyes of the man were like twin open furnaces burning with an intolerable brightness.

The young man quaked with a cold ague. Then the flaming eyes, as it were, streamed their feverish warmth into his own sockets, his brain, his blood. Chedo staggered from the line a pace forward, crying drunkenly through his dry husk of a mouth:

"Marko! Prince!"

The giant raised a mighty arm athwart the sky. In his clenched fingers shone a battle-club of steel and silver and gold. Thrice the mace shook in a gesture of wrath and blood-lust in the morning sun. Then the giant spoke, and his cry rang like a brazen alarum down the field:

"Forward!"

The piebald wheeled and with a great leap went up the slope. The Serbs, at first in twos and threes, and then all together, ran after. And first ran Chedo, so close that gravel and pebble from the steed's hoofs arched up and smote him in the face. He raced on, waving the flag, and shouting as though to tear out his lungs:

"Marko! Kraljevitch Marko! Prince!"

There was a fierce gladness in his heart.

Running, screaming, delirious with excitement, the troops swarmed up the hill. Then the Turk batteries spoke; and the slope became a thing of sheeted flame and steely hail and blood. Staggering, blinded, Chedo leaped forward again, and the others followed—followed the white

rider into the smoke. Shells whined and rained, bursts of rifle fire thinned the advancing ranks to ragged patches, riddled men pitched and fell. And other men came running into their places.

"Allah il Allah!"—Chedo could hear the shouts of the Turks. He was very close to the walls now. Something like a blow struck hard into his groin; then he felt the warm blood of his life pass in a gush over his thigh. He reeled on, holding the flag very straight over his head.

"Prince!" he cried exultantly. "Kraljevitch!"

He staggered and fell at the foot of the castle wall. He stood up and fell again, leaning the flag against the masonry there as his fingers slipped over the stones. The Serbs were scrambling all around and past him.

All at once Chedo realized that the piebald horse had come to halt beside him. He looked up wonderingly, and he saw something soft and tender in the eyes of the White Prince, he saw the bearded lips part a little and smile. A great arm sheathed in glittering mail reached down from the saddle and took the flag. The piebald horse reared very high, so high that the seven belts seemed leagues over Chedo's head. And the White Prince thrust the flag's staff into a crevice atop the wall.

Chedo's eyes swam with a blind weariness. When he looked again, he saw the red, blue and white barred cloth snap bravely against the heavens.

CAPTAIN AGANOVITCH gulped amazedly at the colors on the castle wall. He saw also that the Turks were fleeing in a mad riot of panic-stricken disorder. . . . It was impossible! A bayonet charge routing a fortified enemy! However . . .

The Turks were flying for their lives. The captain stared across the slope. After that first blast, the Serbs had suffered hardly a loss.

He walked up to the castle wall.

"Well and bravely done!" he said. Then, recalling his outraged authority, he uttered harshly. "Nevertheless, Chedo, I told you—not until I gave the order."

Chedo's lips twisted into a painful smile. "But, sir, when Kraljevitch Marko commands——" His eyes filmed, he coughed, and said no more.

* * * * *

Author's note:

The attack at Prilep may be regarded as the best authenticated story of its kind, since thousands of soldiers told the story and that within a few hours of the event. Harold Temperly, writing in the *Contemporary Review* of August, 1916, explodes the Angels at Mons story, but says of this: "We must accept the genuineness of the Serb witnesses' evidence." General Mishitch's own story of the attack, as told within a fortnight of the occurrence, may be found in the *International Psychic Gazette* of May, 1918. There is an account of the incident also in W. M. Petrovitch's *New and Old Tales and Legends of the Serbians.* To this source I am indebted for a description of the legendary prince; for in writing the story I have fictionalized it to the extent of presenting through Chedo the experience as it occurred—or seemed to occur—to any of the foot soldiers in the attack. We have it upon good authority that listeners heard wounded men discussing the miracle in the hospital *that night,* a space of time too short to permit of the diffusion of such a legend as grew up about the defense at Mons.

Fioraccio*

By GIOVANNI MAGHERINI-GRAZIANI

EVERYBODY called him Fioraccio, but his real name was Antonio, and he kept a little shop for bread and macaroni just there by the bridge, where the tobacconist's is now. He was a little man, short and thick, always dressed in a striped jacket and low shoes which were never tied. He never wore a hat, summer or winter; and when the sun shone on his head, which was as bare as the back of your hand, it glittered like a brand-new tin kettle. He had yellow eyes like a cat's. He always seemed to be laughing in a sneering, scoffing fashion; and when he spoke he whistled, because he had lost his teeth; in front he had only two left, one on each side. If there ever was a rascal in this world, Fioraccio was one, and one of the first; and in his own place there was more talk of him than of Barabbas in the Passion of Our Lord. I don't mean to speak ill of him, all the same; he's dead now, and long since gone to his own place.

As I said, Fioraccio had a shop where he sold bread, wine, and macaroni, and kept a sort of little inn. But the real shop was behind, where the door opened into the garden; there he kept a store of all sorts of things—wood, cloth, old iron, barrels, flasks, oil-jars, grain, wine, oil—for Fioraccio was a receiver of stolen goods; and whatever was stolen sooner or later found its way to him, and in all the years that he kept up this trade the police never once got a single chance to lay hands on him. They were after him, time and again, and hundreds of times his shop was searched, but to no purpose. When they came to look, the goods were safely hidden, and Fioraccio never brought them to light until all danger was over. If he bought anything he never paid for it; nobody had ever seen the color of his money; he paid in oaths. If any went to his shop they never got full weight. There was a saying, "At Fioraccio's some get eight, and some get nine, but nobody gets ten."

There were not the inspectors then as there are now. For that matter, in his shop nobody stopped to talk, nobody ever got the right change; and if any made any complaints, they got nothing but abuse. For this reason nobody who was in a hurry ever went to Fioraccio, and he troubled himself little about his customers.

*Translated from the Italian.

"I don't care if they don't come," he said, "they only give trouble."

For that shop, you see, was only the cover for the other one. But if there was anything worth while going on, he was ready enough to put himself out, and often stayed up the whole night long. Otherwise, he sat the whole blessed day at the door of the shop, and had something spiteful to say to everyone who passed; young or old, man or woman, married or unmarried, nobody escaped his tongue.

He knew neither Easter nor Lent; one day was the same as another to him. If the holy sacrament passed by his door, he didn't even take the pipe out of his mouth or get off his stool—he smoked faster than ever, to show his disrespect. He would hear nothing about Madonna or the saints; and if the priest asked him, as he was blessing the houses, "Fioraccio, do you want the holy water?" he would answer: "I can give it myself."

Hardly was his old father in his grave when he cleared all the pictures and crosses out of the house; and when the old woman who swept out his rooms asked him if he wasn't afraid of the judgment, he answered,

"I don't want my wall covered with rubbish."

If he'd been content with being wicked himself! But he was always making mischief, and putting other people up to evil doings. He didn't even respect innocence, and taught little boys to lie and steal. For example, a nephew of his own, about eleven years old, whom he took to live with him—he said to the boy every morning when he sent him out,

"Now mind you don't come home empty-handed tonight."

And if he brought nothing he would give him no supper, and even beat him sometimes.

"If you want your supper you must earn it," he told him.

NEAR the shop of Fioraccio there was one belonging to an old aunt of his, who was nearly blind. Fioraccio used to send the boy into this shop to rob the till; and as the boy was little, and there wasn't the paper money, as there is now, he used to tell him always to bring the white money, and to take it while the old woman was at the door, but not to take too much at a time or people would find it out. And when the boy brought scudi, or other silver money, Fioraccio would give him a sou or a toy.

But one day the boy was caught, and beaten worse than a donkey. To excuse himself he told the whole story, and how he had been taught to steal, and by whom. And Fioraccio, when he heard it, beat him worse than ever, and turned him out of the house. So Fioraccio remained alone—alone in the house, and alone in the shop; and at last nobody came into the shop any more, for they didn't like to be sworn at. "Some day the earth will open under his feet," they said. They called his shop "Inferno"; and even now, if anyone is heard to swear very hard, people say, "Holloa! has Fioraccio come to life?" For he had become a proverb, you know.

And so he lived for many years; but at last his time came, like other people's. He began to look very old, and to get up late, and go to bed early. The shop would be open every other day; then open two days and shut three days. He grew to be a perfect skeleton, all skin and bones. Everybody said, "Ah! Fioraccio isn't long for this world."

And he wasn't. The shop was always shut now. Sometimes he'd come to the window in the middle of the day, when it was fine, but he looked so dreadful it

was enough to frighten one. It was old age was the matter with him, and for that there's no cure. At last he took to his bed; but instead of repenting and changing for the better, he went on worse and worse. He blasphemed like a fiend. The worse he was, the worse he swore. At last the old woman, who was the only creature that went near him, told him that if he didn't stop swearing she wouldn't come any more.

"Why not?" asked Fioraccio.

"Because I'm afraid that some day the devil will come and carry us both off," said the old woman.

"Oh, the devil! and the devil! If there was one really, he'd have made me a visit long ago," said he.

The priest, when he heard how ill Fioraccio was, said to himself, "I must go to him; there's no help for it!"

And he went; but they say he made a fast that day, though it wasn't in the calendar. He knocked, and went upstairs. When Fioraccio recognized the priest's voice, he said,

"What does that fellow want with me? I won't see him."

"How? you won't see him!" said the old woman. "It seems to me it is only polite of him to make you a visit."

"Oh yes, I dare say, but I don't care for such politeness; priests are like owls, birds of ill omen. And——"

But the old woman had opened the door by this time, and beckoned to the priest to come in.

The priest entered the room.

"But I told you not to come in," howled Fioraccio.

"Good morning, Antonio."

Fioraccio only growled.

"I heard you were ill, and——"

"It was something that they didn't say I was dead."

"And I thought I would come and see you." So he began to talk; but as soon as he tried to bring the talk round to the point he desired, Fioraccio always changed the subject. At last the priest grew desperate, and laying his hand on Fioraccio's shoulder:

"Fiore," he said, "you mustn't be angry if I speak seriously to you. You know that we haven't only the body to look after——"

"I know what you mean; but when I want to confess I'll send for you."

"But, of course, whenever you choose——"

"Pray don't trouble yourself——"

But the priest wouldn't be content without preaching a little; so he began to talk of repentance, and restitution, and such things. When Fioraccio heard the word "restitution" he flew into a rage, and called out,

"Did I ever rob you of anything?"

"I don't mean that; I mean——"

"Now, listen, Mr. Rector. You and I do very well as long as we are apart, but if we meet we disagree. So, if we're to have peace, you'd better not come here any more. Do you hear?" And he turned his back, and not another word would he say.

"How goes it?" asked the old woman.

"He won't hear of it. If those above don't take it up, I don't see what is to be done. Tomorrow I'll come, at all events," said the priest.

"The Lord and Our Blessed Lady grant it." But before the next day Fioraccio suddenly grew worse, and before the priest could get to him he was dead.

This happened in 1837, and there are plenty of people living now that remember the whole story, and can tell it you better than I can. Scarcely was he dead when he turned black all over, so that it was a horror to look at him. They rang the bell, carried him to church, and then

into the churchyard, where they buried him.

THE next morning, before day (it was hardly four o'clock), the priest was in bed, when he heard a knock at the door, and asked who was there, thinking some sick person wanted him.

"It's Cecco, the sexton," said the servant.

"What, in Heaven's name, does he want at this hour?"

"Wants to see your reverence."

"Send him in; let's see what it is."

Cecco appeared at the door, hat in hand.

"What's the matter now?"

"Something you'll hardly believe. Didn't your reverence bury Fioraccio yesterday?"

"Of course I did. What about it?"

"He's got up again."

"What?"

"He's got up again."

"Impossible!"

"It's the case, all the same. I was passing by on my way to work in the field. When I was passing the burial-ground I turned round to look in, and there, just where we buried him, I saw something white. I thought I must be dreaming, and as by chance I had the key in my pocket, I went in to look. It was he—Lord keep us from lies!—but I turned short round, and came away without looking back."

"So you came here and waked me."

"Whom else was I to come to? The strange thing is that the earth looks as if it hadn't been touched."

"Someone must have done it to play you a trick. You're sure the gate was locked?"

"Locked and bolted. And he wasn't very pleasant to go near, either."

"Did you bury him again?"

"Not I, indeed! And, perhaps, your reverence must come, for perhaps it isn't all quite natural. I mean—you know——"

"This morning I can't manage it; I have that affair at X——."

"You could come before that; the whole thing won't take more than an hour."

"No, no; mind what I tell you. Go and bury him again."

"But——"

"Only you put him deep enough, I'll promise you he won't come above-ground again."

The sexton turned his hat round and round. At last:

"Your reverence shall be obeyed," he said. "I'll go and get the tools."

And he went out; but before he shut the door the priest called him back.

"Say nothing about this, you know."

"Your reverence may depend upon me. I won't say anything.—Well," said Cecco to himself, as he drew the door to after him, "at least I shall have lived to say I've buried the same man twice."

The next morning there he was again. The priest called out:

"What now?"

"Same old story."

"What story?"

"Fioraccio."

"Above-ground again?"

"Just that."

"It doesn't seem possible."

"But it's so. If you don't believe me come and see for yourself."

"I do believe you, but what can I do? You must just bury him again. Someone must have——"

"If you saw the state he's in you wouldn't think anybody would be likely to want to meddle with him."

"I don't know. Sometimes——"

"Well, I'll bury him this time, and then we'll see."

THAT same day—I remember it as if it were yesterday—I was taking some tools to the smith to be mended, when I came upon Cecco coming away from the burial-ground with the spade in his hand.

"Been putting somebody to bed?" I asked.

"If you knew!" said he.

"What?"

"I've just buried Fioraccio."

"Only now? What did you keep him above-ground so long for? Wanted to be quite sure he was dead?"

"I've buried him over again—twice." And he told me the whole story.

I wouldn't believe him, and I remember saying: "I'm sure somebody helps him to get above-ground."

"Somebody does, you may be sure, and it's easy to guess who."

"I know what you mean. Somebody who has no need of a spade. Look here," I went on. "Let's you and I come and watch here tonight, and see who comes. Are you afraid?"

"No!" he answered; "not with you. I wouldn't stay alone, though."

"Say nothing to anybody, and at nine o'clock tonight I'll come for you, and we'll see if I'm right."

That night at nine o'clock there I was.

"Shall we go?"

"Come along; but we'll take something in our hands, in case it should be anybody."

So we each took a thick stick, and started for the cemetery. It was an ugly black night, promising rain. Outside we couldn't stay; we should have been seen.

"Where can we go?"

"Let's go in."

Cecco opened the gate, and we went in; but we could not shut the gate when we were inside.

"Leave it ajar," said I; "if anyone comes it won't be by the gate, but over the wall."

"But here we shall be seen."

"Where's he buried?"

"There, by the dead-house."

"Let's go in there, then."

"In the dead-house?"

"Where else? There's no other place."

There was a bench, and we sat down. I began to light my pipe.

"What are you doing?" asked Cecco. "If they see the light they'll know there's someone here."

"Oh yes, as if I was going to stay here all night without even smoking; I should go to sleep."

We said very little more; neither he nor I had any wish to talk. We heard nothing but the bats, which kept flying in and out; now and then a dog barked.

THE clock struck eleven. I thought I heard steps on the road, but they passed by.

"It's Faustino," said Cecco. "I know his whistle"—for he had begun to whistle as he passed the gate, as people do when they feel a little timid. About half an hour later an owl flew close by my face, and gave me a great start; but she was afraid of us, and flew off, and we heard her hoot outside.

"It must be nearly midnight."

"We might go now. Nothing is likely to happen tonight," said I.

"Wait till the clock strikes."

"Very well, we'll wait."

"Listen, there's the clock. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven—twelve."

I felt him catch me by the arm.

"Look, look there!"

There, where Fioraccio was buried, the earth began to heave and roll, rising slowly, slowly, as if it were pushed up from below, and we saw him rise out of

it upright; he remained so for a moment, and then fell at full length on the grave. Cecco said not a word, but strode off across the cemetery and went out, and I after him. I wanted to turn back and look if it were really he, but I hadn't the courage; I passed close by him, but I didn't look. Cecco was trembling from head to foot; I knew by his voice.

"Did you see?" he said.

"I saw it. Won't you shut the gate?"

"I won't touch anything. The rector must come tomorrow and see for himself —he wouldn't believe me. I'll go straight to him now, and you must go with me."

"But we can't go at this hour," said I; "tomorrow morning early, rather. I'll go home with you to sleep. I told them at home that I should be out all night."

IN THE morning early we went to the priest, and told him all that happened.

"And what are we to do?" he asked.

"If your reverence doesn't know, who should?" asked Cecco.

"If you tried——"

"Tried what? Burying him again? You see it's of no use."

"Certainly it is no use," said I; "in holy ground he won't stay, that's quite plain—such a rascal as he was."

"Hush!" said the priest. "Don't tell anyone of this—I lay it on your consciences; and, besides, we have no right to judge the dead. You, Cecco, go and put him once more underground."

"Your reverence may command me in everything, but, saving your presence, I can't and I won't go back to the cemetery again; here's the key, but go I won't—that's flat."

"Never mind, I'll send someone with you, if you're frightened. And you"—to me—"go to the convent of ——— with a note for the father superior."

He wrote the note, and I took it to the convent. The superior read it, and said to me,

"I understand; tell the rector that everything shall be done as he asks."

I took back the answer to the priest.

"Have you got him underground?" I asked.

"Yes, but I thought we never should manage it, I assure you."

"Do you want anything more of me?"

"Not now; tonight, perhaps. If I want you I'll send for you."

"You will find me at home; I'll come directly."

All the while I was at work I was wondering what the priest could want of me, but I thought it must have something to do with Fioraccio. Just after sunset the priest's nephew came to tell me I was to go to the parsonage. I went, and found there two Capuchin friars, who had come to exorcise Fioraccio. The priest wanted me to come with him.

"When?" I asked.

"Tonight."

"Then I must go and tell my wife."

"What in the world are you doing always out at night?" asked she.

I told her some story or other, and after supper I went off to the priest. He would have it that I should sup again with him. The friars would neither eat nor drink, and we heard them praying aloud in the next room, and reciting the office. Just before midnight one of the friars put his head in at the door and said:

"It is time now. Let us go."

The priest turned pale, but he was forced to make a virtue of necessity and to come with us. We took a lantern, and went out of the house by the garden door.

THERE were five of us—the priest, the two friars, Cecco, and I, all as silent as the grave; in the dark, that way, we

seemed like conspirators. I was in front with the Capuchins; Cecco and the priest came behind. When we came to the gate I lit the lantern; plenty of trouble it gave me, too; I thought it would never light, but at last I found a match that would kindle.

The priest was the first to enter the cemetery.

"What did I tell you?" whispered Cecco; "there he is again!"

I was in front. The light fell full on the face of Fioraccio. But why do I call it a face? It was black as charcoal, with open mouth and those two yellow teeth, and the yellow eyes wide open, shining in the darkness. I turned sick and stopped short.

"Heavens! how ugly he is!" I cried.

"Hush!" said the friar who was nearest me.

Then they put on their stoles, opened their books, sprinkled the dead with holy water, and recited the service of exorcism. I held the light; the priest clung to my sleeve, and I felt him tremble; indeed, from time to time he gave such convulsive starts that the lantern shook in my hand, and the friars could not see to read.

"Antonio! Antonio!" called out the friar, "Antonio! answer, in God's name."

Not a word did he say.

"Try calling him Fioraccio; perhaps he won't answer to his Christian name." This I whispered into the friar's ear.

The Capuchin sprinkled the corpse once more with holy water, then began calling,

"Fioraccio, answer, answer!"

There came a deep voice, hollow-sounding and far away, as if from fathoms underground.

"Who calls me? What do you want?"

It was the devil, who answered for him.

"Why do you not stay where you have been laid. What is the reason you do not rest?"

"Because I can not."

"Why can you not rest?"

"Because——" And he began to tell us why. Such things! such things! that he had done in life. The priest put it all under the seal of confession with us afterward. He said that he was damned body and soul. And saying this, he swore a fearful oath. And then he said,

"Take me away from here."

"Where do you want to go?"

"To the Arno. Under water twenty braccios deep, where I can hear no bells."

"You shall have three braccios."

We heard another oath, always in that voice underground, for Fioraccio's mouth never stirred. And the friars sprinkled him again with holy water.

"For the last time; how much water must you have?"

"Five braccios."

"You shall have three, and no more."

He went on swearing. At last he said,

"Well, if I must I must, but not in too much of a hurry."

And at that moment we saw something, dressed all in red, fly up over the wall.

"We must come back tomorrow," said the friars. "God have us all in his holy keeping!"

WE LEFT the cemetery; you should have seen the priest how he trembled. The next day he sent for me and told me,

"We must take him away tonight, and you must make a coffin for him."

"But I never made a coffin in my life."

"You can manage it somehow. You can generally get to the end of what you undertake. And it needn't be such a fine piece of work, you know, so long as it holds together."

"Well," said I, "I'll do my best."

I went home, and looked up some chestnut planks I had, and made the coffin. Then I went to the parsonage, where I found the Capuchin friars and the priest talking together.

"The coffin is done," I said. "Shall I bring it here?"

"What are you thinking of? Tonight, after dark, you must take it to the cemetery and put him into it; you can call Cecco, if he will go with you—in short, do the best you can; only get him into the coffin. Then he must be carried—somehow——"

"I understand," said I; "I am to look after the whole business. Very well, I'll see what I can do. Cecco wouldn't hear of carrying him; we had better ask some of the Brotherhood."

"No; because we must keep it as quiet as we can."

"As quiet as you like. But it is a long way to the Arno, and that coffin is made of chestnut. It is heavy, I can tell you."

"Can't you find a cart?"

It was settled that I should borrow my cousin's cart, and the priest should find some more men. Then I went for Cecco, who made no end of difficulty about coming, and after dark we carried the coffin to the cemetery. There he was again, uglier than ever. One could see that he was damned only to look at him.

"Here, Cecco," said I, "help me to lift him."

I turned round. No Cecco. I ran out of the gate, and found him in the road.

"Look here," said he, "if you can't manage it by yourself, you must get somebody else, for you've seen the last of me in there."

I went back. I had a great mind to run away, too, but I had promised his reverence, and, besides, it wouldn't have done to make a scandal. So I set the coffin on its side, and rolled him into it. Blessed Virgin! it almost made me faint away. Then I had nothing better to do than to turn round and look at him. It was the light, perhaps, but he looked just as if he was grinning as he used to when he was alive. I threw the cover on, anyhow, and bolted as hard as I could go.

The priest had told me to harness the cart toward ten o'clock at night, when there would be no one about, and bring it to the cemetery. I found waiting for me at the gate the priest, the two friars, Cecco, a brother of Cecco's, and three others whom the priest had sent for. We took up the coffin in silence, and put it in the cart; then I took the donkey by the bridle, and we set off. It was a dark, close night, when one could hardly breathe or see where one was going, though we had two lanterns. What we went through on that road God only knows—now we were on this side of the road, now on that, now among the trees, never ten paces straight ahead; and the poor donkey tugged and tugged, as if the coffin had been made of lead. Every minute one or the other of the lanterns went out. From time to time we passed through a thick fog, so thick that we lost sight of one another, of the east, of everything.

The friars went on muttering prayers and sprinkling holy water, and we recommended ourselves to God and to the Madonna. Even I lost courage altogether. As for the poor priest, we had to leave him at a farmhouse on the road, for he could go no farther. But that was nothing to what followed. Just as we passed the turning at the mill of ——— a hurricane burst over us that uprooted trees, carried off hay-stacks, tiles off the roofs, all sorts of things. We were surrounded by a cloud of leaves, twigs, straw, and dust. I never remember another such whirlwind. Two hay-stacks

flew off into the air as if they had been locks of tow; a big pine-tree that two men couldn't clasp round went rolling over the plain like a twig; and along the banks of the Arno oaks uprooted, willows twisted together like yarn. Nothing was to be seen of the cart or of the beast —nothing; we could not tell which way they had gone. We commended our souls to Heaven, and went on.

I DON'T know how we found our way to the bank of the Arno, just where it is deepest. We could hardly recognize the place. We found the donkey standing there, quite still.

"Here," said the friar.

"No," said the same voice we had heard in the cemetery. "More water—more water!" And then oaths, to make one's hair stand on end with fright.

"No; there's enough here."

Then more oaths, and more oaths.

"Here," said the friar, "I command you, in the name of God!"

All of a sudden there was a great rush and sputter of flame, as if one had thrown sulfur on a fire, and we saw a figure like a galley-slave, all in red, and heard a splash and a gurgle, and when we looked at the cart it was empty. I went home, put the beast in the stall, and turned to go to the house.

"Who's that?" cried my wife. "Wait; I'll get up."

I didn't answer; it didn't seem as if it was me she was speaking to.

"Will you have something to eat?" she said. "You had no supper yesterday. I'll make a fire and cook this bit of beef; it will only take a minute."

So saying, she began to kindle the fire.

I looked on while my wife put a fagot on the coals, which began to sputter and send out sparks, and I said, without thinking,

"Just like him."

"Just like whom?" said she.

I perceived that I had said too much, and wanted not to say anything more; but it was of no use, she had it all out of me. I tried to eat, but couldn't swallow a mouthful. I went to bed. When I was nearly asleep I heard the house door open. I listened, and heard a noise as if the kettle and the bucket were rolling over the floor.

"There's somebody there," said my wife.

"Hush," said I; "I hear them," for the noise began again.

"Get up; there's someone there."

I got up and went into the kitchen. Nobody was there—the bucket and the kettle each was in its place, the door shut and bolted. I went back to bed, but couldn't close an eye until morning. The noise kept on all night in the kitchen.

The next morning, when I went out, I met the old woman who had taken care of Fioraccio. She stopped me and asked me about what had happened in the night, of which she had heard something. When I told her about the noise in the kitchen, she said,

"At that same hour I could not sleep, and I took up my rosary, meaning to say it for him. Hardly had I begun when I saw him appear, all dressed in red, and he said to me,

" 'No need to say it for me; it's of no use. I'm damned—damned for all eternity.' "

Coming Next Month

A BREATH of perfume heavier than jasmine was exhaled through the crypt as the laughter subsided.

"Too late," murmured the voice. "You called me from the forgotten blacknesses of Time's beginning. You lured me from oblivion. And ears that for uncounted centuries had not heard the voice of adoration again thrilled to those solemn words which mocked Time and the laws that were ordained.

"*Baali,* I rose from the perished memories of uncounted lovers. From the dust of their dead brains and from the lingering traces of their time-bleached souls—bleached gray in the home of the cheerless dead—there came once more a memory of me, and I lived.

"You chanted like Lucifer singing to the Morning Star on the crest of Zagros. You sang like Lucifer crying his defiance across the vast gulf. And now that I am here, you are seeking her in preference to me. . . ."

She laughed, that woman's voice, with ominous sweetness.

"I am here. Even I, Lilith—Daughter of the Dancer, the Queen of the *Lilin*—and you thought that I would stand aside for any earth-woman? Whoever summons me must have thought for no other."

"You devil! I'll send you back——" Graf Erich choked with wrath.

The phosphorescent presence in the center of the mist column laughed again: low, musical, and withal, a bitter laugh.

"You can not send me back, *Baali.*" The voice enunciated that appellation of respect with a finely modulated note of defiance.

Graf Erich's dark eyes flashed somberly, and shifted from the shadowy presence to the bronzed, inscrutable faces of the five adepts who, squatting at the vertices of the pentacle, stared with their fixed gaze beyond the Border.

"You dare not," murmured the voice of the iridescent mist. "You know that you dare not use that weapon against me," reiterated the softly speaking doom. "Even you would stop short of such infamy. They are your disciples in dark magic. Even to save *her,* you would lack the courage to attempt that hideous treason. And you know that!" . . .

You can not afford to miss this ethereally beautiful and fascinating weird story about a gloriously lovely but evil woman who came out of the womb of Time, across the dusty centuries. It will be printed complete in WEIRD TALES for November:

Queen of the Lilin

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

—ALSO—

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A thrill-tale of ancient magic, brought from the black island of Haiti to the United States—with shocking consequences.

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A novel ghost-story, about a great musical genius and a weird concert to his memory.

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The amazing story of a scientist who fought the great nations of the world single-handed in his attempt to put an end to war for all time.

Also the amazing chapters that bring Robert E. Howard's vivid novel, *The People of the Black Circle,* to a conclusion.

November WEIRD TALES Out November 1

THE EYRIE

YOUR editor has just returned from a three-weeks' vacation, and is appalled at the number of manuscripts waiting for him to read. Stacked neatly in two piles on the desk in front of him, they completely shut off his view of the outer office, thereby aiding him, perhaps, in concentrating on the work in hand, which is the preparation of the Eyrie for this month. Though such a prolific outpouring of manuscripts by authors from all parts of the globe makes the editor work hard to earn his keep, still it would be an ill-favored wind indeed that blew nobody good. The very lavishness of the literary offerings from which to make our selection assures you that WEIRD TALES will continue to keep up the high standard which it has maintained since this magazine was first issued, more than eleven years ago. The bulk of the manuscripts are from unknown authors, and the editor is always hoping that he may discover among them a new C. L. Moore, a new Robert E. Howard, a new Edmond Hamilton, a new August Derleth, a new Arthur J. Burks, to mention just a few of the literary discoveries that have been made by WEIRD TALES. Where there is plenty to choose from, a high quality is assured. Our difficulty is not so much in picking out good stories as in deciding which good stories are the best; for it would take a magazine many times the size of WEIRD TALES to publish all the good stories that are read in the editorial offices.

Two Outstanding Stories

Edith Hurley, of Welch, West Virginia, writes: "I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES since its inception, and have followed with much interest the letters in the Eyrie, and the vote for the month's best story. Two stories which struck me as being outstanding, both as to idea and phrasing, received no mention so far as I know. One was *The Last Magician,* by David H. Keller—a jewel of a story, the idea fresh, and the handling delightful. Donald Wandrei, author of *The Lady in Gray,* shows a real knowledge of the rules governing the weird story, although his debt to Poe is obvious. So gracefully does he blend prose and poetry, so hauntingly musical are his words, that the result is enchanting. Your readers who laud certain contemporary writers as being the superiors of Poe, stating that none of the latter's stories is sufficiently horrifying as compared with their favorites, overlook the fact that horror suggested is always more effective than the effort to set down concrete facts. There is nothing particularly terrifying actually set out in *The Fall of the House of Usher* or *The Mask of the Red Death,* or in Arthur Machen's fantastical collection *Ornaments in Jade* and his *The White People,* but no one can be impervious to the horror that lies beneath the surface of these stories. The mind will go only so far; ultimate horror is to be dreamed of and whispered, not set down in black and white. Apropos of all this, I believe almost any lover of the weird will concede that Mr. Lovecraft is the finest craftsman among your contributors. I thought his *The Dreams in the Witch-House* and *The Whisperer in Darkness* truly remarkable examples of modern weird fiction. Clark Ashton Smith and A. Merritt are also favorites of mine."

In Praise of Cave

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "I have just completed reading the August issue and I find it another superb number. I enjoyed, most of all, *The Isle of Dark Magic* by Hugh B. Cave. This story has an atmosphere of sinister feeling all the way through, as is the trend of all of Mr.

Cave's tales. I have often wondered why you don't publish more stories by this author than you do. *The Brotherhood of Blood* and *The Ghoul Gallery*, written by this author, will always linger in my mind as two of the best stories ever to appear in WT. I must express a word of praise for the serial, *Vampires of the Moon*, by A. W. Bernal, which ended in the July WT. That story is a most unusual, interesting and exciting tale, and I would thoroughly enjoy another story of this type."

Conan and Howard

Alvin Earl Perry, of Rockdale, Texas, writes: "Robert E. Howard held me enthralled throughout his masterpiece, *The Devil in Iron*. With each succeeding tale Howard becomes better; his unique character, Conan, is the greatest brain-child yet produced in weird fiction, even overshadowing Moore's Northwest Smith and Quinn's dynamic little Frenchman, Jules de Grandin. Yet, despite Howard's fine work, I believe that the best tale in the current WT is *The Three Marked Pennies*. Miss Counselman never turned out a better one, and she will have a hard time writing another as good. I already have perused the little classic four times. . . . The latest Northwest Smith story, *Dust of Gods*, by C. L. Moore, has that author's usual masterful touch. Moore's vivid descriptions rival those of Clark Ashton Smith. The cover design is above the ordinary; Brundage is the most finished author now painting for any fantastic fiction magazine. . . . I hope you are still considering an author's page; contrary to the belief expressed by certain of your readers, I think that such a department would add to, rather than detract from, the reputation of WT. If we knew about the authors, whether their lives be crammed with excitement or normally dull, the stories would prove of much greater interest to us all."

They Like Brundage's Pastels

Alicia and Ellington Curtis of Osprey, Florida, write to the Eyrie: "Brundage's covers are all right and if he wishes to use some nudism in his symbols he should be given full scope rather than be hampered by a few 'aginners' who reflect no more than a passing fad of censoring which will soon be forgotten. Pleasing the many rather than a few chronic 'antis' would be much the

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stronger and saner policy for WEIRD TALES. . . . As for the stories, we should like a little more atmosphere and slightly less science. . . . As for reprints, W. H. Hudson's *Marta Riquelme* is a knockout and Baudelaire has composed some little gems both in prose and poetry."

Constant Improvement

Edison Price, of New York City, writes: "Over a period of several years I have been a devoted reader of your fine publication. During this time its consistent high quality has seemed almost above improvement; but in the last several issues you have surpassed what was hitherto your best. Moore's *Scarlet Dream* seemed superior to both *Shambleau* and *Black Thirst;* his precise yet delicate handling of the plot, together with the exotic atmosphere—similar to the dreamy contentment of Tennyson's *Choric Song*—produced a masterpiece almost beyond comparison. . . . As for the August number, it takes my breath away. Howard's *The Devil in Iron* far excelled his other recent efforts. *Dust of Gods* did not appeal to me as much as *Scarlet Dream;* still it was very good. Moore never says more than should be said; much of his ability lies in the way he avoids any unnecessary explanations, with their attendant inhibitive effect upon the imagination; the air of mystery never lessens. One feels that the stranger who hired N. W. and Yarol could have told quite an interesting tale himself; but then there would have been less continuity, and a far less artistic result. Miss Counselman's *The Three Marked Pennies* was altogether unique and held the interest from beginning to end; but Ernst's *The Marvelous Knife,* perfectly constructed, was still better. I can recall no short weird that surpasses it, and few that equal it."

Magazines for A. Merritt

A. Merritt, one of the world's masters of fantastic fiction, and author of *The Woman of the Wood,* is anxious to get a complete file of WEIRD TALES from the first number in 1923 up to the last number of 1927, including the Anniversary Number. He will greatly appreciate letters from those who have single copies—or all copies—of WT for those years, quoting prices. Address your letters to A. Merritt, care of WEIRD TALES, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, and they will be immediately forwarded to him.

From a CCC Camp

Robert W. Lowndes writes from Flagstaff, Maine: "Can't one of your authors, Clark Ashton Smith for instance, think up some appropriate form of punishment for mentally depraved readers who claim the covers on WT to be indecent? Or perhaps H. P. Lovecraft could work up some brew which would dispel their idiotic ideas and open their eyes so that they could appreciate M. Brundage's lovely girls in all their unhidden beauty. The very assumption that WT *could* be a sex magazine from the covers can be nothing less than the whisperings of some diabolic spirit within these readers. Quick, Watson, the exorcist! And while we are mixing the broth, why not have Harold Ward call down one of his soul-masters to do away quietly with those who howl for an author's page in WT? We also need the services of Jules de Grandin, Pierre d'Artois and Conan the Cimmerian to stand at all portals leading to the editor's desk and mow down all authors who come in with stories for WT that are not weird. Alas! their sorcery is potent, for full many times has our editor been enmeshed in their necromantic webs and we have had such stories as *King Cobra* and *On Top.* Don't forget to have Northwest Smith take personal charge of guarding the reprint department, as our heroes of the outer gates will have their hands full, and only a few issues ago we got one that was quite anemic. Well, Mr. Editor, I'll leave you now so that our friends can work out their campaign. The siege will be long and heavy. Our assailants are possessed by the most dire of dark helpers and the most powerful formulæ. Here's to you for those fine serials we have had this year, the dandy covers (except for the March), the length of said serials (remember, no more than four installments), and for Northwest, Jules, Conan, Pierre, and a host of others. And here's more power to Brundage, may his tribe increase, may his nudes never know sackcloth as some would suggest."

The Parasitic Twin

Charles Minarcik, of Brooklyn, writes to the Eyrie: "In the August issue you reprinted a story called *The Parasitic Hand,* by R. Anthony. The story seemed to me at the time to be rather far-fetched. Imagine my surprize upon finding a similar case in real

life! Feeling that it would prove interesting to you also, I am taking the liberty of enclosing herewith the newspaper clipping which brought the real life case to my attention." Here is the clipping: "Richmond, Virginia, Aug. 15.—One of the strangest operations yet attempted by surgeons will be performed soon on Miss Daisy Violet Powell, in an attempt to remove what they believe to be the body of a twin sister from her body. The girl was born in Calcutta 24 years ago. The strange growth was first discovered when she was ten. An operation for what was believed to be a tumor in her side revealed another body with hair, tissue and bone. The surgeon called in to make a study of her case died and other doctors refused to attempt the operation, fearing it would endanger her life. The Powell family recently came to this country and Richmond surgeons, hearing of the case, studied it, and have finally decided to operate."

A Horse Race

Eugene Benefiel, of Los Angeles, writes: "When I got my August copy of WT and looked through it, it struck me as one of the finest issues of 'our' magazine it had ever been my pleasure to get. From cover to cover, starting with Brundage's cover painting of a scene in *The Devil in Iron* and ending with your excellent reprint (I always read the reprint last—it ages it more), WT gives us this time C. L. Moore, Robert E. Howard, Hugh B. Cave, Frank B. Long, Jr., Francis Flagg, Arlton Eadie, Mary Elizabeth Counselman, Clark Ashton Smith, Paul Ernst, and R. Anthony. I ask you—is that an all-star line-up, or is it? In my opinion, *Dust of Gods* rated first by a nose over Howard's *The Devil in Iron,* with Miss Counselman's strange little tale, *The Three Marked Pennies,* half a length back in the show spot, and the rest of the field pushing the pace to record-breaking time by the leaders. They were all A-One, and Brundage's cover topped it off perfectly. What a magazine!"

One Christmas Eve

Harry S. Weatherby, of Washington, D. C., writes: "I have been a steady reader of WEIRD TALES for nine years and I have greatly enjoyed the majority of your stories. . . . The best story in your July issue was *One Christmas Eve,* by Elliott O'Donnell. It was the most clean-cut little ghost story

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that I have ever read, barring none. Second was *The Trail of the Cloven Hoof*, by Arlton Eadie. It was very weird. . . . But how about more vampire and good old-fashioned ghost stories? And less of these planetary yarns."

Against Stories of Other Planets

Walter L. Reeve, of Erving, Massachusetts, writes: "Though I have read WEIRD TALES since it started, I have not (as one of your recent contributors to the Eyrie said) added my voice to the general clamor. So here goes. In the first place keep WEIRD TALES weird. Stories of other planets are O. K. but there are too many other magazines with the same type of story. As one of my friends remarked the other day: 'Good-night! first they tow the Moon around, then the Earth, then the Sun, then the Universe, and then to cap it all they start in on Galaxies!' Weird stories ought to grip the imagination, create eery feeling and make us half believe it might be so. As I have just finished the June issue, here's my idea of it. The best story: *They Called Him Ghost*. Not so good: *Vampires of the Moon* —same old theme."

M Stands for Margaret

Steven Fogaris, of Passaic, New Jersey, writes: "In reference to the controversy over whether your cover artist, M. Brundage, is a man or a woman, I would say that the artist is a man. And in addition to the masculine first names beginning with M, as given in the Eyrie, I would add Michael, probably the most noted of the M names. Others are Macleod, Matthew, Maurice, Montague, Montgomery. Or perhaps Artist Brundage has the most common first name in the world, Mohammed, as so many millions are called. Or perhaps he is cursed by some such name as Mordecai, given him by some fond aunt. A lot of good names are wasted if Artist Brundage *is* a woman."

Praise for the August Issue

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes: "The August issue of WEIRD TALES was outstanding. . . . To begin, *The Distortion Out of Space* was colossal. It contained, in its few pages, a cosmic scope fully equaling *Through the Gates of the Silver Key*. Let's have more like that from Mr. Flagg. And by all means induce H. P. Lovecraft to break his silence more often than once a year. C. L. Moore scored another triumph with his *Dust of Gods*. His imagination and originality seem inexhaustible. That little tale, *The Three Marked Pennies*, by Miss Counselman, was original and unique. It contained a certain amount of grim humor and subtle wit that

My favorite stories in the October WEIRD TALES are:

Story	Remarks
(1) _____	_____
(2) _____	_____
(3) _____	_____

I do not like the following stories:

(1) _____	Why? _____
(2) _____	_____

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showed the author must have a keen knowledge of human nature. Robert E. Howard's *The Devil in Iron* furnished an hour of first-class entertainment, as did also Hugh B. Cave's *The Isle of Dark Magic*. The only real disappointment was Frank B. Long's story, *The Beast Helper*. We have come to expect much better than that from him, and after waiting so long for a new story from his pen, I think he rather let us down a bit. Tell him to stick to tales of cosmic horror like *The Space-Eaters* and *The Man with a Thousand Legs*. What has become of Donald Wandrei? I would like to see something more by him on the type of *Something From Above*. . . . When, if ever, will you reprint John Martin Leahy's tale of cosmic horror, *In Amundsen's Tent?* As you know, there have been several requests for this splendid tale, and you have continually evaded the issue." [*In Amundsen's Tent*, which appeared in WEIRD TALES for January 1928, will be used in our reprint department sometime, but not soon, as it is less than seven years since this story was originally published in WEIRD TALES. As to Donald Wandrei: A story by him entitled *The Destroying Horde* will soon appear in WEIRD TALES, and we hope to print many more stories by this gifted writer.—THE EDITOR.]

Price's Exotic Stories

E. Z. Stowell, of Hampton, Virginia, writes to the Eyrie: "I would like to see some more exotic stories by E. Hoffmann Price. Those stories of his that you have already published show real artistic ability in that field. You will be very foolish if you change the type of cover design. The present covers show excellent imagination and workmanship, and as for beauty, they are ahead of any magazines on the stands." [We will publish many more stories by Mr. Price. Our announcement page in this issue tells you about his next story, *Queen of the Lilin*, for which a beautiful cover has been prepared by M. Brundage.—THE EDITOR.]

A Reader for Twelve Years

Wilfred D. Wright, of Toronto, writes: "As a consistent reader of your splendid monthly story-books for twelve years, I wish to express a few brief comments and opinions. A.—Your periodical has no real competitor as far as material goes, and its writers

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surpass all other types of contemporary magazine authors in literary skill. B.—The taste of genuine weird tale readers should be wide. Hence different types of weird stories, by different writers, have their own appeal; viz., Mr. Quinn, by comparison, is not truly weird, yet the tremendous personality of Jules de Grandin is so human and likable that one misses an old companion when he is not among the pages of WT. I suggest that Mr. Quinn's stories be titled as An Adventure of de Grandin as related to, and set down by, Seabury Quinn. C.—Those covers . . . my remark is: Who cares? Tear them all off if you do not like them; WEIRD TALES is my magazine, covers or no covers, printed or painted. Other than appreciation of Brundage's or any other illustrator's art, I got over being influenced by pictures when I finished reading *Mother Goose*. . . . I shall continue to read WT as I have in the past, because of the gripping, eldritch tales of elder times by Lovecraft and Smith; for the imaginative thrills of the future adventurers of Hamilton and Moore; for the lovable personality of de Grandin by Quinn; for the thrilling old barbarian Conan of Howard; for Mr. Eadie, Mr. Long, Mr. Cave, Mr. Wandrei, Mrs. La Spina, and all those old and new writers of the genuine weird story as found only in your magazine, WEIRD TALES."

Most Popular Story for August

Readers, you can help keep WEIRD TALES up to your liking by telling us what are your favorite stories in each issue. Let us know why you like them; and if there are stories that you dislike, we want to know about them too. Write a letter to the Eyrie, or fill out the vote coupon on page 526 and send it to us. The most popular story in the August issue, as shown by your votes and letters, was *The Devil in Iron* by Robert E. Howard. This was pressed for first place by C. L. Moore's story, *Dust of Gods*.

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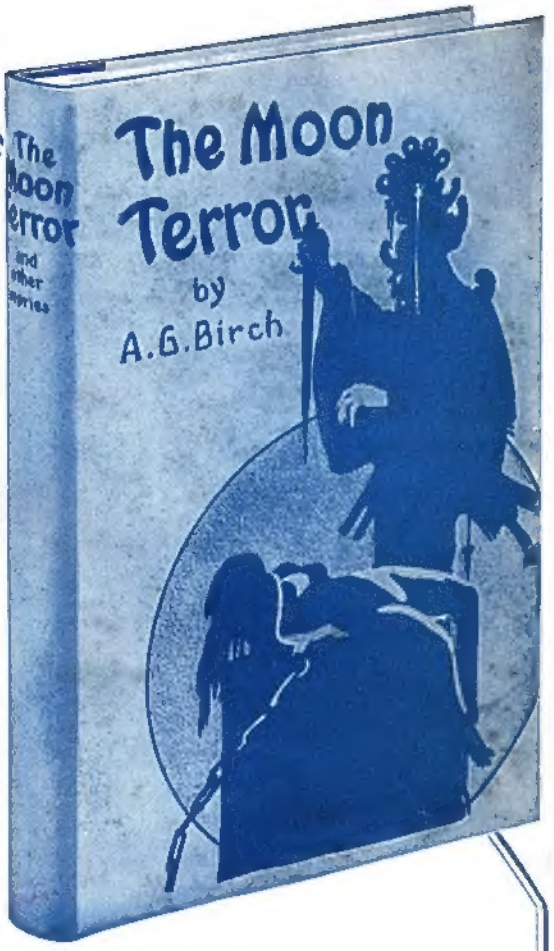

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